THEIR DARKEST HOUR
THEIR DARKEST HOUR, BOOK 1
CHRISTOPHER G. NUTTALL

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

When alien starships from a hostile interstellar power arrive in orbit, Britain is one of their first targets. Swiftly, the aliens take control of Britain's cities and force the remainder of the British military to go on the run. With the government destroyed, the population must choose between fighting and collaborating with the alien overlords. This is truly Britain's darkest hour.

Caught up in these events are a handful of ordinary people, struggling to survive. The Prime Minister, forced into hiding, and an unscrupulous politician looking to find fame and power by serving the aliens. Soldiers fighting an insurgency and senior officers trying desperately to find the key to driving the aliens away from Earth; police officers faced with a choice between collaboration or watching the aliens brutalise the civilian population. And ordinary citizens, trying to survive a world turned upside down.

But resistance seems futile and the aliens appear unstoppable — and the entire population is caught in the middle. As the alien grip tightens, the last best hope for freedom lies with those who will never surrender… and are prepared to pay any price for the liberation of Earth.

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Christopher Nuttall
THEIR DARKEST HOUR

"No one would have believed in the last years of the nineteenth century that this world was being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own… across the gulf of space, minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us."

— H.G. Wells

Prologue

The senior officers of the Conquest Force rose to their feet as the Command Triad entered the briefing room. *Ju'tro* Oheghizh bowed his head in submission as they took their three seats, each one representing and commanding an element of the fleet. Together, they would oversee the conquest — and pose no threat to the state, back home. They'd be too suspicious of one another to ever plot treachery together.

"We have been observing Earth for the past five of its rotations," *Va'tro* Nak'tak said. *Years*, Oheghizh reminded himself, careful to think in the language of the prey. "The humans are a curious race. They may well be more unlike us than the Uteck."

A rustle ran around the compartment as his words sank in. The Uteck, unlike most known races, didn't possess two arms, two legs and one head. They were utterly alien — which hadn't stopped them fighting the Eridiani to a standstill in fifty years of bloody warfare. The State still believed that they could defeat the Uteck and occupy their worlds, but it would be a long time before anyone saw fit to resume the war. It had simply been too costly.

"The humans have progressed remarkably unevenly," Nak'tak reported. "Their space presence is pathetic; they have yet to establish a base on their moon or start mining asteroids for war materials. They are literally unable to pose any threat to the Conquest Fleet, even once we are in orbit around their world. Furthermore, their ruling power seems curiously unwilling to crush its enemies — they appear to be willing to accept the hatred of their inferiors, instead of forcing their inferiors to submit. This is without a precedent in all of known space."

There was a pause. "However, in certain areas, they are actually more advanced than ourselves," he continued. "Their most advanced computer systems are more capable than the devices we use on these starships — and certain other advancements may pose a threat to the Landing Force once we start taking up positions on the planetary surface. In particular, they have an alarmingly high number of nuclear weapons and — we must assume — a willingness to use them if they face defeat."

Azhadib, the Director of Conquest, spoke into the silence. "Do you believe that this race will make acceptable clients for the State?"

"We believe that it may be harder than we expect to convince them to submit," Nak'tak said. "Unlike our previous encounters with low-tech races" — all of which had been brought into the service of the State, their development short-circuited by their natural masters — "they offer the promise of a workforce that will not require

extensive training to grasp the basics of our technology, assuming that they are capable of grasping it at all. We have a secondary reason not to simply exterminate this race. They will be very useful to us."

He didn't mention the first reason, Oheghizh noted, in the privacy of his own mind. Known space had many mysteries — races blossomed to life, built their empires, dominated the galactic scene for a few million years and then faded away — but even the State had heard rumours of the Elders. They'd been warned that genocide would be harshly punished. Oheghizh wasn't sure if he believed the tales or not — the idea of someone being more powerful than the State was difficult to grasp — yet it seemed clear that *someone* believed them. There was no other explanation for the prohibition on genocide.

Earth spun in the centre of the compartment, a luminous orb glowing with blue-green light. It looked almost homelike, yet it was home to over seven *billion* humans. He glanced down at the reports the observers had filed in their long study of Earth, carefully monitoring the humans and devising plans for the invasion and conquest of their world. As one of the senior Land Force commanders, Oheghizh could expect high honours and rewards if he succeeded in bringing his portion of Earth under control — and endless infamy if he failed. The humans would pose a formidable problem, even to the State. But they would succeed. Failure would not be tolerated.

The assignments had been sorted out by the Command Triad and passed down as a unanimous decision. Oheghizh would be assigned to a medium-sized island nation, still one of the most advanced and developed states on Earth. Quite why they hadn't developed any form of unity was a surprise — technological advancement tended to unite previously separated nations — but it hardly mattered. Their political divisions would work against them when the Conquest Fleet revealed its presence. They would have no time to plan a unified defence before they were overwhelmed.

And slowly, but surely, Oheghizh and his companions drew up their plans against Earth. The Human Race would never know what had hit them until it was far too late.

Chapter One

RAF Coningsby/Salisbury Plain/London
United Kingdom, Day 1

"It looks like a busy day for us, boys and girls."

Flying Officer Alexandra Horton smiled as Squadron Leader Rupert Paddington opened the briefing. The men — and single woman — of No. 3 Squadron rarely had an uneventful day, even when they were patrolling the skies over Britain. After 9/11, every civilian aircraft that went off course sent ripples of alarm running through the United Kingdom Air Defence Region and it wasn't uncommon for Tornados or Eurofighter Typhoons to be scrambled in response to an aircraft that had simply lost its way. Not that anyone was allowed to become complacent, of course. The Eurofighters were scrambled with live weapons and everyone knew that one day a hapless pilot would be faced with the choice of shooting down a civilian aircraft or watching it plunge into the Houses of Parliament. Alex was mildly surprised that none of the thousands of terrorist plots monitored by MI5 had ever come close to taking off.

"We've been informed that the UKGDE boys have been tracking more ghosts," Paddington continued. "Someone higher up the food chain is getting just a little bit concerned with these reports and they'd like some hard data. You may be directed to perform an interception if a ghost shows up while you're in the air."

Alex frowned, thoughtfully. Over the last few weeks, radar sets in Britain — and America as well, she'd been given to understand — had been tracking a handful of transient contacts that seemed to be travelling right at the edge of Earth's atmosphere. The general feeling was that someone — perhaps in Britain, but more likely in the United States — was testing a new model of stealth drone by flying it through one of the most advanced air defence environments in the world. It wasn't an uncommon procedure, but surely *someone* would have said something by now, if only to prevent an interception that brought one of the craft down. Rumours she'd heard suggested that some of the top brass were more concerned than they admitted, at least to the pilots. There was a distant possibility that the Russians might have produced something new that they were using to probe NATO's defence environment.

She shook her head, reaching up to feel her short blonde hair. Her fellow pilots had nicknamed her Starbuck back when she'd started training to fly the Eurofighter and the name had stuck. Being assigned to No. 3 Squadron was hardly a blot on her record, even if defence

cutbacks did make their position increasingly insecure. She'd heard that some of the top brass were worried about their ability to defend the UKADR if more squadrons were placed in reserve, or eliminated altogether. Buying the Eurofighter might have seemed like a good idea back before 9/11, but now the money was flowing to the army and aircraft that could provide support to British troops on the ground. The Eurofighter was an excellent piece of kit, yet it didn't have the close-support capability of an Apache helicopter. Their service in Afghanistan had always been far less decisive than the MOD had hoped.

"Horton and Davidson, you'll be on routine patrol, taking over from the lads out there now," Paddington said, finally. "Jackson and Stuart will be on QRA, ready to provide backup if there's a problem or you need to return to base. Don't forget to keep one eye on your radar sets at all times. You never know what you might run into up there."

There were some chuckles from the pilots, although they all knew that a mission could shift from routine boredom to sheer terror within seconds. Up in the air, *they* would be in the front line, not some paper-pusher in Whitehall who would happily question every little decision made by the men at the front. Alex knew pilots and soldiers who had been hounded out of the service by the MOD, or the government, merely for making poor decisions on the battlefield. It seemed to have escaped their notice that soldiers and pilots had to make their decisions within seconds and there was no time to take a balanced view of anything…

She shook her head as Paddington dismissed them and headed for her plane. The flight plan said that she would be in the air within half an hour. There was nothing quite like flying over Britain as the dawn rose. And if she was lucky, it might even be a routine patrol.

* * *

Darkness shrouded Salisbury Plain, but the sound of humming engines could be heard — faintly — in the gloom. Dawn was approaching, the horizon starting to light up in the distance, leaving the French with little time to get across the river. Brigadier Gavin Lightbridge-Stewart allowed himself a tight smile as he lay on the ground, using his night-vision goggles to peer into the shadows. The French didn't know it, but the British Army had prepared a nasty surprise for when they tried to reach the mock town.

Full-scale exercises were rare — the days when the British Army could roam across Germany on exercises were in the past, and it was incredibly expensive to ship men and equipment to Canada or the

USA — but the bean-counters had finally agreed to allow a joint exercise with the French. A section of French tankers had agreed to play the attacking force, simulating an attack from Russia into the European Union. Officially, the French were playing a fictional nation — it was typical of the politicians to be more worried about upsetting the Russians than helping out the soldiers who defended them — but everyone knew the truth. Russia had been rather more noisy than usual over the last few months and senior officers had been warning the politicians that important skills were being lost.

His lips twitched into a smile. The British Army was intimately familiar with the terrain and they'd used it to their advantage. A troop of Challenger tanks had been positioned to give the French a bloody nose, while ground-based air defence systems had been deployed to prevent the French from using a drone to spy out the British defences. Once the French tanks started to cross the river, they'd find themselves caught in a trap — unless they had a surprise of their own up their sleeves. The politicians on both sides of the Atlantic might deride the French, but the French military was tough and very professional. And it had picked up rather more experience in the years since Algeria than many outsiders realised.

He keyed his radio, speaking barely above a whisper. "Prepare to engage," he ordered, calmly. It wasn't common for a Brigadier to lead from the front, but he'd missed the advance into Iraq and knew himself to be less familiar with armoured warfare than he would have preferred. Besides, paper exercises were all very well, but it took real manoeuvring to gain a real understanding of what his force could — and could not — do. Murphy never failed to put in an appearance in the real world. "On my mark, launch flares and then engage at will."

* * *

"The bloody protesters are still there, I'm afraid."

Sergeant Robin Harrison, London Metropolitan Police, nodded as he strode up towards Buckingham Palace. A small army of men and women carrying signs protesting against the latest cause of the month were gathered outside the gates, shouting at passer-bys while sharing drinks and food amongst themselves. It seemed that there was no shortage of protesters in London; Robin knew from secret briefings that anarchist and other radical groups were streamlining their 'rent-a-mob' systems. The Police had responded by monitoring Facebook and other social networking sites, but the technical staff had warned that their ability to take down parts of the internet was very limited. Robin wouldn't have cared so much — people had the right to protest, as

long as they behaved themselves — if criminal gangs hadn't started using protests as places to rob the protesters blind. It had only been three months ago when the Police had had to intervene when the dedicated protesters started turning on freeloaders within the camps.

"So I see," he said, tiredly. Overtime seemed to be a fact of life in the Police force these days, as was permanent tiredness and general unhappiness. The number of Bobbies on the street was going down and, despite the vast number of CCTV cameras all over London, crime was going up. Every few months, they'd even get new targets from politicians who didn't realise that they'd systematically crippled the Met over the last two decades. "Anything we ought to keep an eye on?"

"They seem a surprisingly nice bunch," Sergeant Singh said, seriously. He nodded towards the protesters, who were trying to convince a pair of pedestrians to join them. It didn't look as if they were having any success. "No real fights or anything, just shouting. A few of them keep looking daggers at us, I'm afraid."

"Nothing to worry about then," Robin agreed. The small police force would keep an eye on the protesters, some of whom might even be relieved that the police were there. They might claim to be an anarchist commune, but in his experience those broke down rapidly into chaos and the rule of the strong if there was no presence from the forces of law and order. It hadn't been that long since the London Riots of 2011. "Don't worry — we'll keep an eye on the Palace for you."

Singh gave him a one-fingered gesture and sauntered off in the general direction of the police station, where he'd catch something to eat and a few hours of sleep before he went back on duty. Robin watched him go and then turned to look back at the Palace. It was all lit up, allowing the protesters to see the very heart of the establishment they hated so much. The handful of policemen didn't waste time staring at the Royal Residence. They had to worry about keeping the peace.

A pair of protesters made eye contact with him, and then looked away as if they'd seen something dirty, or obscene. Robin wasn't too surprised. Some of the protesters saw the police as the enemy, the men who broke up protest marches and beat up protesters. His father had been a policeman, as had his grandfather, and neither of them had to endure the level of public distrust modern policemen faced. But back in their day, the police hadn't been cut back to the bone, to the point where ordinary citizens started to see them as the enemy.

He shook his head tiredly. Maybe he'd jack it all in early and find a place in a private security firm. They were hiring and the pay was generally better than the Met. And maybe then his family would get

better care than they could from the NHS. His wife wouldn't even come into London. She preferred to live outside in the suburbs, away from the crowds and pressure. He couldn't really blame her at all. London just wasn't a safe place to bring up one's children any more.

* * *

"Wake up," a voice snapped, in her ear. Doctor Fatima Hasid swallowed a word as her mother pulled away the blankets. "Get up, you lazy girl. You're supposed to be on your way to work."

Fatima scowled at her stepmother, but couldn't quite bring herself to snap at the older woman. At twenty-seven, she should be married and producing kids of her own — at least according to her stepmother. If only her father hadn't married again… but he had, leaving her to put up with an older woman who resented Fatima's presence in her life. Her stepmother had started putting forward the names of suitable boys, most of who lived in her grandmother's village back in Pakistan. Fatima had responded by taking more overtime with the NHS every time her stepmother arranged a meeting. None of the boys she had met had seemed keen to marry a woman who was far more qualified than they could ever hope to be.

She pulled herself out of bed and scowled at her face in the mirror. Dark eyes set in a dark face stared back at her, leaving her with an almost waif-like expression. The uniform she donned rapidly belonged to the nearest hospital, where she worked ever since graduating as a medical doctor. It would be years before she could pay off her debts and go into private practice and until then the NHS owned her, body and soul. She washed her face and headed downstairs, to where her stepmother was banging pots and pans together. It wasn't as if she was doing anything useful either. Fatima had to get her own coffee and cereal before heading out of the house.

"They'll give you the sack and then where will you be?" Her stepmother demanded. Fatima ignored her as best as she could. Her father was already on his way to work, after visiting the mosque for morning prayers. "Who'll want you if you lose your job?"

"The boys you seem to think are suitable for me have no jobs," Fatima replied, as calmly as she could. It was true; her stepmother's family had been pressing her to convince Fatima to marry a boy from Pakistan, who could then be brought to Britain. The fact that Fatima herself didn't want to marry a stranger didn't mean anything to them. They'd all had arranged marriages and they'd turned out fine… well, publicly, at least. Fatima knew that at least one of her stepmother's relatives beat his wife. "And I still have an hour to get to the hospital

before I start scrubbing up."

Her stepmother started to bleat again, but Fatima tuned her out with the ease of long practice. There were times when she cursed her decision to study medicine, even though it provided an independence many of her friends would envy. The screaming kids in the waiting room, the injuries inflicted by chance or deliberate malice, watching men and women dying slowly in front of her… there were days when she just wanted to walk away from it. But that wasn't an option, not when she still had to pay off her debts. The NHS was dreadful when it came to arranging life-saving medical treatments, yet somehow it was very good at tracking down students and demanding that they repay the loans they'd taken out to study…

She shook her head as she finished her coffee and headed for the door. She'd just have to endure until the day she could leave the NHS behind. And then perhaps she could set up in private practice, or maybe even leave the country. There were high-paying jobs for medical staff in America, she'd been told. Maybe she'd emigrate and leave her stepmother behind. The thought made her smile, even as she saw the dawn rising over the horizon. Another day was about to begin.

* * *

He couldn't sleep.

Prime Minister Gabriel Burley stood in Ten Downing Street and peered through the bullet-proof glass at the protesters at the end of the streets. It seemed that there wasn't a day when the protesters weren't there, screaming and shouting as if they blamed Gabriel personally for the economic malaise that had gripped Britain over the last ten years. The country didn't seem to be able to hold together a government for more than a year either, not after the latest round of parliamentary scandals. Gabriel, two years ago, had been nothing more than an up-and-coming MP, a safe pair of hands for a Parliamentary seat that was solidly Conservative. He'd never dreamed of becoming Prime Minister, certainly not after his predecessor's career had been blown out of the water in the latest expenses scandal. His opponents had remarked that the only reason Gabriel had avoided being implicated in the scandal had been because he didn't have the imagination to fiddle his expenses, let alone do anything more interesting. There were times when Gabriel feared that they were right. Nothing he did seemed to please everyone, or even anyone.

He looked down at his desk and shook his head, bitterly. It was covered in folders, each one a wordy report from the Home Office, the

Ministry of Defence or the Security Services. He was supposed to read them all, but reading them was a chore. Didn't anyone use plain English these days? He'd once spent an hour reading a briefing paper on recent developments in Iraq only to discover that it could have been condensed down into five or six sentences. At least he'd been able to make his feelings clear on *that* point. It was a shame that the Civil Service took so long to adapt. The next Prime Minister would probably not see any improvement.

One of the walls of his office held a large painting, commissioned by his immediate predecessor. It showed all of the Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom, from Pitt the Elder to Gabriel himself. He'd been surprised to receive it, only to be told that it had taken so long to produce that the Prime Minister who'd ordered it had left office by the time it had arrived. The Prime Ministers seemed to be gazing disapprovingly at him, as if they felt that he was letting the side down. They were probably right. When Gabriel compared himself to Pitt, or Churchill, or Thatcher, he always found himself lacking. But then, they'd never had to worry about an economic crash that was slowly bringing the country to its knees…

"Lucky bastards," he muttered, as he returned to his desk. The files sat in front of him, mocking him by their silent presence. His secure palmtop buzzed, reminding him that he had the daily security briefing in an hour, followed by several meetings with MPs before his speech in Parliament in the afternoon. The speechwriter had promised him a good speech, one he could read out before the assembled MPs, but it wouldn't go down very well. It never did, not when all he could deliver was bad news. There were times when he felt that the only reason the Opposition hadn't pushed for a no-confidence vote was because they didn't want to be saddled with commanding the sinking ship. They found it more congenial to snipe and shout abuse.

He opened the first file and looked down at it. It was just as he feared; a short summery, and then twenty pages he'd have to read, just in case some bastard with press credentials hurled a question at him. They'd have a field day with an ignorant Prime Minister. Cursing under his breath, he tapped the intercom and called for coffee. He'd read through one of the files, he promised himself, and then he'd have some time to relax. And then he'd attend the briefing.

And then all the alarms went off at once.

Chapter Two

Over Norwich/Salisbury Plain/London
United Kingdom, Day 1

"You know," Davidson remarked, "Becky has been quite jealous recently."

Alex rolled her eyes. The two Eurofighters were heading south-east, high over Norwich. It was definitely shaping up into a routine patrol, which was part of the reason they were bantering together as they flew onwards. It helped them remain alert and remind them that they weren't alone, even if they were flying single-seat aircraft. Fliers could forget about everything else while boring through the sky at just under supersonic speed.

"I thought you were dating Kate," she said, mockingly. Davidson's love life was the stuff of legends. Fast-jet pilots never seemed to have any difficulty finding female companionship while they were off-base. "What happened to the poor girl?"

"One of those Para bastards got his hands on her while I was looking the other way," Davidson admitted. His girls never stayed with him for long. "I think they were talking about getting hitched, last I heard."

Alex snorted. "And who does Becky have good reason to be jealous of?"

Davidson affected a hurt tone. "I'm shocked that you could think that I might cheat on her," he said. Alex snickered and made a one-fingered gesture towards his plane. "She's jealous of my Typhoon, Alex. I get into her and I take her to Heaven twice a day."

"I always knew that you were terrible in bed," Alex said, fighting down the urge to burst into giggles. "That joke is older than the CO's CO. And if you keep moving from woman to woman, you won't live long enough to get promoted into a desk job."

"You make it sound as if they'd kill me," Davidson protested. "I think…"

"Charlie One, Charlie Two, this is Sector Control," a new voice said. Alex straightened up at once, feeling ice shivering down the back of her neck. "We are picking up a single contact on intercept vector; I say again, we are picking up a single contact on intercept vector."

Alex glanced at her radar screen as… *something* blinked into existence. Dead ahead of the Typhoons, it was advancing towards them at Mach Four. For a moment, she thought it was a radar glitch, the kind of glitch that had caused panic during the height of the Cold

War, or the years after 9/11. The contact remained alarmingly stable, refusing to vanish. She ran through the situation in her mind and realised that they'd be in visual range within two minutes. What the hell could travel at that speed? There were rumours of a hypersonic drone being test-flown in America, but what would it be doing over Britain?

"Acknowledged, Sector Control," she said. "Be advised that we will attempt to make visual contact; I say again, we will attempt to make visual contact."

"It could be a ghost," Davidson said. He sounded excited. Alex had flown a real-life interception mission before, back when the Russians had flown a pair of Blackjack bombers over the North Sea to remind NATO that they existed, but Davidson's military experience was limited to dropping bombs over Afghanistan. "You think we could be the first to see one with our own eyes?"

Alex glanced at her radar screen, and then peered ahead into the lightening sky. If she saw the craft… it was possible that someone higher-up would order them to avoid contact or to forget what they'd seen, if it *was* someone's secret test project. They should come into visual range in seconds…

Her threat receiver lit up like a Christmas tree. "What the hell…?"

A streak of light lanced out of nowhere and struck Davidson's Typhoon before he had a chance to evade. The weapon, whatever it was, hit its target so hard that Davidson's plane was blown into a fireball before he had a chance to realise that he was under attack. Alex yanked her plane into an evasive course just as a second streak of light — a very fast missile, according to her on-board displays — slashed through where she'd been. They were under attack! She almost froze in shock — only her training kept her moving. The radar was reporting *dozens* of new contacts now, appearing from nowhere over the North Sea and moving towards the British mainland. One finger uncovered her firing buttons as she tried desperately to call for reinforcements. The QRA aircraft should have been in the air the moment the radar controllers on the ground realised that something had gone badly wrong.

"Sector Control, this is Charlie One…"

Her radio screeched, loudly enough to force her to turn it down in a hurry. Someone was *jamming* her, preventing her from calling for help. The unknowns, whoever or whatever they were, were angling towards her, slowing as they came. Whatever they were flying seemed to outmatch her Typhoon effortlessly — who the hell were they? Alex gritted her teeth and activated her targeting systems. An enemy craft came into her sights and she launched a pair of missiles right towards it. The craft started to turn, but it was far too late. One of the missiles

struck home and the enemy craft exploded in a shockingly powerful blast.

Another missile was screaming toward her. Acting on instinct, she corkscrewed her plane through the air, realising that she was utterly outmatched. But running could be as dangerous as trying to fight. A black shape appeared out of nowhere in front of her and she plunged the plane down, catching sight of an angular aircraft that reminded her of the F-117 Nighthawk, only several times as large. She took a shot at it anyway — it couldn't possibly be friendly — but she couldn't tell if she'd inflicted any damage. Whatever was screwing with her radio was screwing with her radar as well.

A brilliant flash of light caught her attention, from the west. Something had exploded on the ground, but what? The entire country couldn't be under attack, could it? The RAF hadn't had any reason to think that *someone* intended to attack Britain — or if they had, the senior officers had never bothered to tell the pilots. Her threat receiver screamed again, too late. The entire aircraft buckled around her…

Desperately, moving so quickly that she hadn't quite realised what she *was* doing, she pulled the ejection lever and exploded out of the aircraft, into the suddenly-hostile sky.

* * *

The first of the French tanks were coming into view, a trio of AMX-56 Leclerc Main Battle Tanks. There were a handful of soldiers flanking them, watching for antitank teams that could target the heavier vehicles with Javelin missiles, but Gavin could tell that a number of Frenchmen were missing. The French hadn't been engaged so far, which suggested that Lieutenant-Colonel Jean-Luc Baptiste had a plan of his own. Who knew what those missing French soldiers would be doing while the British attempted to take out the main force?

A streak of light slammed down from high above and struck the lead French tank. It exploded in a colossal fireball, the turret actually being blown into the air. Gavin stared in utter disbelief. What the *fuck*? Had someone in the Royal Artillery accidentally loaded live ammunition into the big guns? A second missile struck a tank, followed by a third that missed, almost toppling its target over through the colossal force of the explosion. Heedless of his personal safety, Gavin pulled himself back to his feet, his mind spinning with the sheer impossibility of the situation. They were under attack! They were in the heart of the British Army's Training Area and they were

under attack!

He glanced back towards where the Challengers were positioned, hoping that their crews had enough sense to bail out before they were targeted too. Their unknown opponent — once might have been a dreadful accident, but two or more suggested deliberate malice — had to have gained control of the air. They could presumably detect any moving tanks… but who were they? There had been no report that Russia was planning anything drastic and the only other nation that might have had the capability to attack Salisbury Plain and the garrisons surrounding it was the United States. The thought that they might be at war with America was absurd.

Something caught his eye and he glanced to the east, towards Tidsworth Garrison. A streak of fire was falling from the sky towards the Garrison. It dropped below the horizon, seconds before there was a brilliant flash of light, followed by a massive fireball. The sound of thunder reached his ears seconds later. It looked almost like a baby nuke! Other fireballs were rising too. It didn't take his intimate knowledge of the training area to know that they were rising from the location of many of the other garrisons surrounding Salisbury Plain. He spared a brief thought for the men and equipment that had presumably been destroyed in the blasts, and then started to run for the command vehicle. The tactical command centre had been buried well behind the ambush point; it should — *should* — have escaped detection.

He waved a hand at Sergeant Gibbon as the Fijian soldier appeared from the concealed tanks. "Get a crew down to check out the French and get them under cover," he barked, trusting the Sergeant to deal with the situation. A number of young soldiers looked badly shocked, holding their personal weapons as if they were unsure what to do with them. He silently blessed his own insistence on issuing loaded weapons to the men, even on training exercises. It had been intended to ensure that the tankers were used to carrying them, but he had a feeling that they might be needing them to fight. "And then send a runner to each of the garrisons. I need to know what we have left in the fight."

The tactical command vehicle was half-buried under a small mountain of earth. Gavin pulled at the hatch and it opened, revealing a cramped compartment with the latest in communications and coordinating gear. He hadn't been too impressed with the entire concept when he'd first heard of it — the command vehicle wasn't even as well-protected as the wretched Snatch land rover — but it might have proved itself useful today. A pair of operators, both looking as if they were on the verge of panic, glanced up at him in relief.

"Report," he barked. "Who the hell hit us?"

"Sir, I don't know, sir," the lead operator said. He looked far too young and nerdy to serve with the army, but his skills at pulling information out of the ether were remarkable. "All of our communications links have gone down!"

Gavin swore. They had a laser link to the British-owned satellite communications network and various NATO systems. If they were all gone, it meant that their unknown opponent had somehow taken them all out seconds before launching the attack on Salisbury Plain. It was simply impossible to jam a laser signal, or even detect it. He keyed the radio and cursed when a wash of static blasted from the speakers. They were being jammed. His unit — and every survivor from the garrisons — had been cut off from higher authority. They were on their own, unable to coordinate with PJHQ or the MOD in fighting off the attack on British soil. But who were they fighting?

There was another screech of static, followed by a sudden shift into the BBC. "…Receiving reports of massive explosions in London," a voice said. "We have been unable to reach…"

The signal washed out of existence. For a moment, Gavin was sure that he could hear voices hidden in the static, but he couldn't make out what they were saying. The BBC had been unable to reach whom? The Government? He'd met the Prime Minister during a meeting at PJHQ and he hadn't been too impressed, but he *was* legal authority. And if they were at war… Dear God, just who the hell were they fighting?

He jumped out of the command vehicle and sighted a number of soldiers being alternatively bullied or cajoled into work by Sergeant Gibbon. A handful of men wearing French uniforms were with them, some badly wounded. The French hadn't been the only ones hit on the training area, he noted absently. It was easy to see which British units had been hit as well.

"Sir," a soldier yelled. It took Gavin a moment to place him as the commander of a Rapier missile launcher that had been deployed to provide some protection to the tankers. If they'd had armed weapons… but no one had expected an attack from nowhere. "Sir, we got some data before they hit us!"

Gavin looked over at him. It was hardly the proper way to file a report, but under the circumstances he didn't care. The Rapier was supposed to be monitoring every aircraft flying over the range, including a handful that had been tasked to play enemy aircraft during the exercise. They should have picked up something…

"Sir, the attackers came out of nowhere," the soldier said. "But just before they started firing and we lost the network, the UKADR sounded an alert. So did the NATO network. Sir… some of those craft

seemed to come from outer space."

"Aliens?" Gavin said, in frank disbelief. It was impossible. And yet it made a certain kind of sense. Who else would have the power to take out the satellites, drop bombs — kinetic strikes, perhaps - onto the garrisons and presumably hit London as well? It was impossible, but… he pushed his doubts aside. "Sergeant, pass the word. We'll regroup at Point Alpha — get the military police to sort out who we have left alive and what equipment we have that still works."

"Sir," Sergeant Gibbon said. There was a pause. "What about civilians, sir?"

Gavin winced. Salisbury Plain was a designated place of natural beauty, which meant that civilians could and did get underfoot most of the time. The military was supposed to have jurisdiction over the Live Firing Range, but the word from higher up was to be gentle, if possible. Gavin shook his head. The civilians would have seen the explosions — hell, perhaps the little green men or whoever would have targeted the towns around Salisbury Plain as well.

"Tell them to go back to their homes," Gavin ordered, finally. They'd never prepared for alien invasion. The possibility had never even been considered. "And see if the civilian telecommunications network is still working. We need to know what's left of our country."

***

The ground came up to meet Robin's face before he quite realised what was going on. He hit the ground hard enough to stun him, his body armour taking most of the shock below the neck. Everything seemed to have gone absolutely quiet. Dazed, unsure of what had happened, he started to push himself upright. His jaw felt as if it had been struck by a glass bottle and… what the hell had happened? There hadn't been any warning that someone was behind him, yet what else could have sent him falling to the ground?

He staggered to his feet and looked back at Buckingham Palace. It was gone. He was so dazed that it was several seconds before he realised that something was terribly wrong, and several more seconds before he realised what had happened. Buckingham Palace, the home of the British Monarchy, was a smouldering pile of rubble. Many of the protesters who'd been outside had been hit by flying debris and were badly injured — or dead. They seemed to be whispering, making shapes with their mouths that never became words, almost as if they were miming. He couldn't hear anything, apart from a faint ringing in his ears. It took him several moments to realise that he'd been deafened by a sound so loud that it hadn't really registered on him. He could only hope that it was temporary.

Pulling his radio off his belt, he keyed the emergency switch. Every copper within five miles should start converging on his position,

as if they wouldn't be on their way already. This was Buckingham Palace; surely, someone at Scotland Yard would have noticed the destruction of the King's residence. They'd have the fire brigade, ambulances and entire regiments of policemen on their way right now. They might even get to the Palace before some fucking terrorist wannabe started singing their own praises on YouTube, claiming that it was another strike against the oppressive state. Who knew? Maybe the Government would be so angry that they'd take off the gloves and just hit back.

He stumbled towards the protesters, intent on doing what he could to help, when he realised that Buckingham Palace hadn't been the only target. Smoke and flames seemed to be rising into the air from all over London. He'd thought that it was a terrorist attack — even though he couldn't understand how they'd managed to get a bomb into the Palace — but this was on a different scale altogether. There were at least seven different plumes of smoke… he rubbed at his ear, cursing the growing ringing. It was impossible to call for help if he couldn't hear the reply. How could terrorists have pulled off such an attack?

The first protestor, a young girl barely old enough to drink, had been crippled by the blast. Robin did what he could for her, praying that the ambulances would be on their way. But if London had been hit several times… he'd been in enough crisis situations to know that it took time to get organised, time to throw off the shock and take control. How long would it be before someone took command and started funnelling help to the wounded? And what if the unknown attackers had taken out the Government? One of the plumes of smoke seemed to be coming from the direction of Whitehall.

And if they'd taken out the government… he shuddered, unable to face the implications. If they'd taken out the government, they'd committed an act of war.

But who *were* they?

Chapter Three

London
United Kingdom, Day 1

"What…?"

The emergency doors burst open as two men hurled themselves into the Prime Minister's office. Gabriel had no time to react before they grabbed him bodily and carried him over to one of the office walls. It opened, revealing a hidden shaft leading down into the bunker below Ten Downing Street. He yelped in shock as they dropped him, feet first, down the shaft and towards what felt like certain death. Instead, the tube seemed to twitch around him and he found himself slowing and sliding out into the bunker. A man wearing a black uniform caught him by the arm and pulled him away from the tube, just before the first of his own assailants popped out of the tube. Gabriel's mind finally caught up with the string of events and he realised that the Personal Protective Detail assigned to Ten Downing Street were doing their jobs. He'd been briefed on the emergency procedures — everything from terrorist gunmen to chemical or radioactive weapon being deployed against Whitehall — but he was ashamed to realise that he didn't know their names.

One of the men — the leader, Gabriel assumed — tapped a key into a concrete wall. A hatch appeared out of nowhere, revealing a set of metal stairs that led down into the bunker. It was illuminated by flickering lights that seemed to be having trouble remaining alight, suggesting that the power supply to Ten Downing Street had been cut off. There was an emergency generator in the basement, Gabriel remembered, as well as a handful of other precautions, but as far as he could recall they'd never been tested. They certainly hadn't held an emergency drill after he'd become Prime Minister. The oversight, he realised as he clambered down the stairs, might have cost lives.

Another doorway opened at the bottom of the shaft, revealing the Crisis Management Centre. Gabriel had been inside a handful of times, but he'd never grown to like the drab concrete walls and the effect of being cut off from the rest of the world. The only decoration was a painting of a cobra a previous Prime Minister's child had produced, a reference to the COBRA Committee that served as Britain's emergency council. No one had had the heart to take it down. The team leader pointed Gabriel to a seat and headed over to the bank of computers and communications equipment placed against one wall.

The ground shook, alarmingly. Gabriel glanced up as the light hanging over the conference table spun from side to side, proving that

he hadn't imagined the explosion. Something on the surface… was there anything left of Ten Downing Street? He silently thanked God that his wife hadn't been in the building. She'd been on a visit to Edinburgh to meet with the First Minister of Scotland, carrying messages from Gabriel that he didn't dare entrust to anyone else. Dear God — had Edinburgh been hit too?

Gabriel took a moment to calm himself, and then tried to sound professional. "What happened?"

The team leader glanced over at him. "I've not sure, Prime Minister," he admitted. He looked a tough young man, but Gabriel had enough skill at reading people to know that he was nervous. "We picked up a FLASH warning from PJHQ warning that an attack was underway — we immediately grabbed you and got you into the bunker. But most of our communications lines appear to be down and…"

Gabriel stared at him. "Has Downing Street been destroyed?"

"No, Prime Minister," the team leader said. He frowned, looking down at the console. "I can't get through to anyone else — not PJHQ, not Edinburgh, not anyone. The radio network appears to be being jammed. I'm not sure… ah."

He looked up as the main door to the conference room opened, revealing Major-General Sir Alan Robertson. Gabriel allowed himself a moment of relief. Robertson commanded the Household Division, the main body of troops in London. Among other duties — both operational and ceremonial — the Household Division was responsible for evacuating the Monarch, the Prime Minister and other government ministers from London in the event of an emergency. Robertson wore a combat uniform and carried a pistol on his belt. He was followed by three other soldiers, all carrying rifles and wearing combat uniforms.

"Prime Minister," Robertson said, relieved. "Thank God you're safe."

"You too," Gabriel said. A fourth soldier had arrived — but he looked more like a man dressing up rather than a real soldier. He had a pair of glasses and looked slightly overweight, carrying a small laptop under his arm than a weapon. "General… what the hell is going on?"

Robertson looked… worried. "Prime Minister," he said, slowly, "we're at war."

"At war?" Gabriel repeated. "Who with?"

The fourth soldier looked up. "Aliens," he said, flatly. "We're at war with aliens from outer space."

Gabriel stared at him, unsure if he should laugh or cry. "Aliens?" His Personal Protective Detail seemed to be having the same reaction. "*Aliens*? And I suppose that Doctor Who is going to come along any

minute to tell them to piss off?"

"Please, Prime Minister," Robertson said quietly. "Hear him out."

The fourth soldier put his laptop on the conference table. "Fifteen minutes ago, the entire orbital communications network — ours, NATO's, the Russians — went down," he said. "Bare minutes later, we lost contact with the Deep Space Tracking Network — that's a joint operation largely run by the Yanks, but there are stations on British soil and we have access to the live feed. The last report we had from RAF Fylingdales reported a number of incoming missiles that appeared to have come from orbit. One of their projected endpoints — their targets — was the base itself. The entire Ballistic Missile Early Warning System has been taken down.

"At roughly the same time, ground-based radar stations picked up a number of unknown aircraft breaching the UKADR — that's the United Kingdom Air Defence Region," he continued. "RAF aircraft on alert were vectored towards the intruders — we lost contact shortly afterwards with both the aircraft and their bases. It appears that we have been hit badly all across the country. We have lost contact with almost all military bases within the United Kingdom."

"Which leaves us no choice," Robertson injected, "but to assume that they've been destroyed."

Gabriel felt… weak, unsure of himself. It seemed impossible, yet… if the unknowns, the aliens, had the capability to hit British military bases, there seemed no reason why they wouldn't — if they were hostile. His thoughts ran in circles. Why would aliens be hostile? What did Earth have that would make them worthwhile targets? He'd always been taught that a civilisation advanced enough to master space travel would have outgrown the desire to fight purely for the sake of fighting…

"It gets worse," the soldier said, softly. "We have confirmed that a number of strikes fell in London itself. The Permanent Joint Headquarters has been destroyed, along with a number of railway stations, road junctions, and — for reasons unclear — Buckingham Palace."

"The King," Gabriel said. "What happened to him?"

"He was in residence at the time, along with his wife, his eldest son and *his* wife," Robertson said. "We've had no word. I send a small detachment to the Palace to see what they could find, but first reports say that the devastation was almost total. There is a very good chance that Prince Harry may be the next in line to the throne."

Gabriel shook his head slowly, unable to quite believe his ears. Robertson was talking about the death of the Monarch — and the deaths of thousands of military and civilian personnel — as calmly as if he were ordering dinner. How could he be so dispassionate? Or was

he trying to remain calm in the hope that Gabriel himself would remain calm? If they'd really been hit as badly as Robertson implied, the chances were that his position as Prime Minister was no longer viable. God alone knew what he would be able to do for his country.

"Contact," one of the soldiers said, suddenly. "I got a link through to Salisbury Plain!"

"Excuse me," Robertson said.

Gabriel nodded as the General slipped away, heading towards the bank of computers. How could he deal with an alien invasion? Had it only been an hour ago that he'd been battling with the economic crisis? What would happen if — when — the British population realised what had happened to their country? He looked over at Robertson and found himself envying the man's calm. Maybe he should have gone into the military instead of politics. But then, he would have made a poor soldier.

"We managed to get in contact with Brigadier Gavin Lightbridge-Stewart," Robertson said. The name meant nothing to Gabriel. "He appears to be the senior officer left at Salisbury Plain; the preliminary reports say that the garrisons there have been hit badly. We managed to fill each other in on a few details, but we simply don't know much of anything."

He shook his head. "The Brigadier will be establishing defensive lines and preparing our counter-attack," he said. "We need to get you to the command bunker under the training area. It appears to be intact, thankfully. The aliens don't seem to know about its existence."

"Or they would have hit it," Gabriel said, slowly. "*Can* they hit it and… ah, destroy it?"

"They can drop rocks from orbit," Robertson said. "If they knew about the bunker, they could have taken it out — we assume." He seemed about to say more, when one of the consoles started to bleep an alarm. Robertson glanced at it and then swore aloud. "We've managed to set up a passive detection system outside, Prime Minister. It looks as if they're sending in shuttles."

Gabriel stared at him. "They're coming *here*?"

"They're coming to London," Robertson said, grimly. "I have two rifle companies in the city, armed for dealing with terrorists rather than alien invaders. We can bleed them — I assume — but we probably can't stop them from landing in the city. We have to get you out of here."

He looked down at the table for a long moment. "Normally, we'd get you and your ministers out through the tunnel network, but parts of it seem to have caved in under the bombardment. I'm not sure if the aliens intended to trap you or if it was merely a fluke, yet we cannot risk using the network. We need to get you upriver as quickly

as possible." He raised his voice. "Butcher?"

One of the uniformed soldiers looked up. "Sir?"

"Check the boat and prepare it for immediate launch," Robertson ordered. He looked back at Gabriel. "Butcher served four years in the SAS before being asked to serve as a Close Protection specialist. Hughie and Mother" — a thin man and a taller man who looked as if he had muscles on his muscles — "both came to us through the SBS. They'll take care of you if anyone can, Prime Minister."

"Thank you," Gabriel said, quietly. "General… what are you going to do?"

"I have to get back to the surface and take control of my men," Robertson said. "We have to assume that they're carrying out a decapitation strike — an attempt to capture or kill you and the rest of Parliament. I intend to give them a bloody nose when they try."

Gabriel hesitated. "Don't get yourself killed, General," he warned. "The country will need you."

"We've barely been at war an hour," Robertson said, "and already we've been hurt worse than Hitler or Napoleon ever managed. God alone knows what's happening to the rest of the world. We never planned for alien invasion, Prime Minister. Hell, the last time we planned for a military invasion was back during the Cold War."

He shook his head. "The lads will take care of you," Prime Minister. "Linux" — he nodded at the soldier with the laptop — "will go with you. He'll be needed at the bunker. Good luck."

"And to you," Gabriel said, automatically. He was struck by the sense that he would never see Robertson again. "General…"

Robertson saluted, and then left the room.

"Come on, Prime Minister," Butcher said, two minutes later. "It's time to go."

Gabriel had never had the chance to explore the entire tunnel network. From what he recalled from briefing papers he'd never had a chance to read properly, the military had taken advantage of commercial tunnelling to add their own network for emergencies. Some tunnels linked government buildings together, allowing swift and silent evacuation; others led to hidden bunkers and archives that were never intended to see the light of day. Some information was in the public domain, he remembered, but the government had managed to keep a lid on most of the specifics. Or so they hoped. Gabriel had also been told that the Russians had gained access to far too much data on the tunnel network and emergency procedures.

Perhaps it was his imagination, but they seemed to be heading upwards — and the air seemed to be getting damper. A faint smell reached his nose, a stench that made him want to recoil, just before they turned into a chamber that held a large boat. Butcher held up a

hand to halt Gabriel while he clambered up and into the boat, vanishing over the side. There was a moment's pause, and then the engine roared to life. The soldier reappeared and held out a hand to help Gabriel climb up. He was ashamed to realise that Butcher had simply lifted him at the end.

A thought struck him. "Why Butcher?"

"Dad was a butcher," Butcher said. "We don't stand much on ceremony, Prime Minister. Once someone passes Selection, they're one of us. The lucky ones get to choose their own handle. The unlucky ones get someone else picking it for them."

He waved Gabriel to sit at the bottom of the boat. The sound of the engine grew louder as the other two soldiers climbed onboard and concealed their weapons and uniforms below blankets. It struck Gabriel suddenly that anyone who saw him would know that he was the Prime Minister, but it was already too late to express his doubts. The boat seemed to leap forwards — there was a terrifying glimpse of a grating ahead of them, followed by a smell that made him want to throw up — and then they were suddenly out in the open. He caught sight of the Houses of Parliament and stared, realising that flames were rising up in the distance, from the direction of the Palace.

The boat started to tilt madly to one side as Butcher pointed them upriver, towards the west. Gabriel struggled to remain calm, even though part of him was convinced that they were going to be thrown into the water at any moment. A handful of other boats seemed to be making their way downstream, clearly intent on getting out of London before something worse happened. He wondered, suddenly, just how much the civilians knew about the crisis. It had never occurred to him to ask… in the distance, he could hear the sound of sirens. The police were responding to the attacks, but did they know what they were facing? And if there really were aliens heading towards London?

It seemed like a bad science-fiction movie, but it was happening…

Twenty minutes later, just as they were leaving London, Hughie tapped him on the shoulder and passed him a pair of binoculars. Gabriel glanced at them in puzzlement, and then looked up into the sky. A flight of aircraft were heading down towards London from the west… but they looked odd. Gabriel pressed the binoculars against his eyes and gasped as he finally made sense of what he was seeing. The alien shuttles were larger than the largest jumbo jet the human race had ever produced and they were heading towards London. They'd escaped the city in the nick of time. He tried to estimate how many aliens could be on those aircraft before realising that it was impossible to produce anything like a reliable estimate. For all he knew, the aliens could be microscopic in size — or they could look like stone statues of weeping angels. And perhaps they wouldn't even be

humanoid.

"We're still being jammed," Hughie said, quietly. The SBS soldier had a faint Scottish accent that echoed through his voice. "We can't warn the General or the troops in London."

"But they know that they're coming," Gabriel pointed out, desperately. Suddenly, he felt ashamed for running. "They must know that they're on their way."

"Maybe," Hughie said. "Or maybe the aliens have ways to avoid passive detectors. Any radar station that lights up is likely to get clobbered. I don't know, sir. We just need to get you up to the command bunker, and perhaps then we can go back to the front lines."

"Or the front lines will come to us," Mother grunted. "Look."

Gabriel followed his gaze. There were more alien shuttles now, hundreds of them, glowing red as they decelerated through Earth's atmosphere. Just for a moment, he wondered how interstellar logistics could make an invasion possible, before dismissing the thought. There was no way to know how alien logistics worked. For all he knew, the aliens mass-cloned soldiers whenever they wanted to overrun another world.

He closed his eyes and said a silent prayer for the men and women who were about to be caught up in a nightmare. General Robertson had been determined to fight — it crossed Gabriel's mind that he should have ordered them out, but it was too late. All he could do now was pray for them — and pray that the aliens weren't savages. An alien race could wipe out all life on Earth.

The sound of more explosions caught them as they headed onwards, echoing back from London. There was no way to know what was going on behind them either. All they could do was pray. And hope that, one day, they would be able to avenge themselves on the aliens.

Gabriel shook his head. An hour. An hour after the alien attack had begun and he was on the run. And to think that yesterday he'd been cursing problems he would have given his soul for today.

Chapter Four

London
United Kingdom, Day 1

"Anything we should know, sir?"

The military officer sighed. Robin had been busy organising what medical help he could for the wounded, after a handful of ambulances and policemen had *finally* arrived. They'd reported that London's railway stations had been hit as well, causing massive casualties as well as jamming up the road network. The emergency services were overwhelmed trying to deal with the chaos. And they still had no idea what was going on. The radio seemed torn between increasingly hysterical bulletins and requests for the public to remain calm and in their homes. Judging from the level of traffic on the streets, Robin suspected that that particular request was going unheeded.

"Yes," the soldier said. A handful of other armed soldiers had appeared, causing many citizens to start edging away from them. Robin wasn't so impressed, if only because he'd spent his probationary period in Southampton, wrestling Royal Marines on Friday nights. "There's a good chance that whoever did this to us" — he waved a hand at the pile of smoking rubble that had once been Buckingham Palace — "is likely to start landing ground troops. You're looking at ground zero for their invasion."

Robin stared at him. A terrorist attack was understandable, even if there had been a hideous failure in intelligence that should have allowed them to detect the plot in time to derail it. Even a handful of bombs detonated around the city was understandable; Islamic Fundamentalism had been suspiciously quiet over the last few months and the radicals knew that they needed to keep staging spectacular attacks to boost their cause. But an invasion… Robin had taken part in drills where the Met had been seconded to the military for a military emergency, yet no one had believed that Britain might actually be invaded. The nightmare of an uprising from the poorer — and Islamic — parts of the country seemed more plausible.

"We're at war," he stumbled, finally. "Against who?"

"We're unsure as yet and we don't have time to speculate," the officer said, firmly. "I need you to get the civilians out of the area as quickly as possible — starting now. God alone knows how much time we have left."

Robin allowed his eyes to trail over the gardens and the surrounding area. A small number of policemen and medics had finally shown up, allowing them to start treating the wounded —

although only one ambulance had arrived, which had been pressed into service to take the worst cases to the nearest hospital. From what little he'd heard from other police officers, London was gridlocked. Everyone who had a car seemed to be trying to get out of the city and to hell with how it impeded the emergency services. The BBC wasn't helping. It was either jammed up with static or raving about explosions in a dozen cities.

"I can't get everyone out…"

"You have to," the officer said, quietly. There was an earnest tone in his voice that somehow stripped Robin's final doubts away. He saw a pair of soldiers carrying handheld antiaircraft missiles setting up a position on one side of the gardens. If the enemy intended to send in paratroopers, the British Army would give them a hot reception. "I don't know how much time we have left."

He strode off in the direction of his men, leaving Robin staring at his back. Robin's training asserted itself and he began to bellow orders. God knew how he'd wound up as senior officer on scene — the mobile command centre had probably been stuck in traffic — but at least no one was arguing. The wreckage of Buckingham Palace had probably concentrated quite a few minds.

"Start moving the civilians out of here," he ordered, sharply. "Draft able-bodied men as stretcher-bearers if necessary; start moving them at least a mile from this location." He found himself grappling with a completely unexpected problem. If an invasion force — absurd as it seemed — was about to land in Central London, where was even remotely safe. "Take control of the traffic and get it moving away from here — commandeer any vehicles that can be used for moving casualties and put them to work. If anyone gives you trouble, arrest them and we'll worry about charges later.

Time seemed to slow down as an endless flow of civilians, government civil servants and worker drones were pushed out of the area. Most of them saw the pile of debris and didn't argue, but a handful seemed insistent that whatever was happening had nothing to do with them. Robin ignored their pleas, then their threats, and finally had a couple arrested and dragged away. The remainder finally got the message and headed away from Central London. A few who might have protested saw the soldiers and their obviously lethal weaponry and made themselves scarce. Robin nodded at two of the soldiers as he checked his radio again, but all he could hear was static. Whoever was jamming them had neatly shattered the Police in London. There were thousands of officers on the streets, cut off from their superiors and probably facing their own private nightmares. Dear God — if the country was really being invaded, what did the invaders intend to do with the Police?

He pushed the thought aside as he helped a pair of constables manhandle a wounded civilian down towards a waiting van. A team of doctors were at least trying to separate the minor wounded from those who needed a hospital immediately, but it was a terrifying nightmare. Hardly any of the civilians were used to violence and anarchy on such a scale and many of them seemed to be on the verge of coming apart. Robin might have joined them if he hadn't felt responsible for managing the crisis. It was certain that no one senior to him had made it to Buckingham Palace. He remembered the explosions all over London and shivered. The invaders, whoever they were, might have taken out Scotland Yard. And if they'd done that, they would have fragmented the entire network.

"Sergeant," a voice bellowed. He turned to see the officer he'd spoken to before, looking grim. "How quickly can you get the rest of the civilians out of here?"

Robin blanched, reading the bad news in the officer's face. "Too long," he said. They'd managed to get most of the people on the move, but the traffic wasn't taking the hint and heading away from Central London. Entire streams of people were being pointed away from the Houses of Parliament and being told to run. It was all a horrible ghastly mess. "How long do we have?"

"Maybe five minutes, maybe less," the officer said. "Radar has picked up enemy craft heading towards London. The chances are that they're coming here. You have to get the civilians out of the line of fire."

Robin nodded and blew hard on his whistle. "Everyone away, now," he bellowed. The other policemen took up the cry. "Move… *now*!"

He looked up at the officer, who had one hand on his pistol. "I'm qualified to fire in the line of duty," he said, quietly. "I could stay…"

"You're needed elsewhere," the officer said. The sound of thunder — no, it wasn't thunder — echoed in the air. "Go!"

* * *

Fatima had never felt so pressured in her life. She'd been on duty at the hospital when the police had sounded the alert and had been rounded up to go to the remains of Buckingham Palace. Seeing the rubble had shocked her, but there hadn't been any time to sit down and cry — not when there was work to be done. Hundreds of people had been wounded and there weren't anything like enough medical supplies to treat them all. From what she'd overhead, the emergency teams that should have been first responders to any crisis had been

caught in traffic, as had most of the ambulances in London. Her mobile phone was useless and the pager she'd been given as they ran out the door had gone blank. She had been forced to improvise splints and bandages for half of her patients.

"Lie still," she said, sharply. The wounded man in front of her had been one of the guards in front of Buckingham Palace when the bomb — or whatever — had blown it into a pile of rubble. His leg was clearly broken in two places and it was quite possible, judging from the bruises, that he had internal injuries as well. She'd bandaged him up as best as she could, but he really needed an operation. It didn't look as if he was going to get one any time soon. "I said, lie still!"

"They need me," the man insisted. He sounded delirious, or perhaps he was going into shock. Fatima put her hand firmly on his chest and held him down gently. "I need to…"

"You need to get better," Fatima said. She'd heard stories of what happened in Pakistan and other less-developed countries when bombs exploded without warning, but she'd never expected to see it in Britain. Someone should have taken control at once and started coordinating all of the emergency response teams. Instead, everything was chaotic and the only people who were trying to establish order were a handful of policemen, who looked as frightened and helpless as the rest. "You can't go back to your unit with a broken leg."

She wanted to give him something for the pain, but there were no painkillers left. A pair of civilians pressed into service as stretcher-bearers appeared and gently lifted the wounded man onto a makeshift stretcher. Fatima checked his leg carefully, warned them to ensure that their charge didn't try to sit up, and then waved for them to go. There was no time to rest — she had to deal with the next wounded person. It seemed that there was no end to the wounded; men, women and children, half of them looking as if they didn't quite believe what had happened to them. This was Britain, not some Third World country where the natives killed each other at the drop of a hat. Disasters weren't supposed to strike the British mainland.

A hand fell on her shoulder and she jumped. "You need to get on your way," a policeman said. He looked about as worried as Fatima felt, but he seemed to have it under control. "You need to escort the patients back to the hospital. This place isn't going to be safe much longer."

Fatima looked up. All over the area, policemen and soldiers were shouting at civilians to move. The wounded were being carried off, followed by those who could walk on their own and the remaining medical staff. She started to follow them automatically, and then stopped dead. This was London. What the hell was going on that meant they had to risk moving so many wounded people at once?

“All I know is that this place is about to get very unsafe,” the policeman warned. He was holding something back. Fatima had done a course in reading people back when she’d been studying to be a doctor. “I think you’d better start moving — now.”

He sounded so earnest that Fatima picked up her bag before quite realising what she was doing. She could hear the sound of thunder in the distance and see plumes of smoke rising up into the sky. Something was clearly badly wrong… shaking her head, she started to follow the wounded. They’d need her when they reached their destination, wherever that might be. It seemed as if the police and soldiers were closing off all of Central London…

* * *

“I think that’s most everyone out,” Constable McEwen reported, grimly. The sound of thunder was growing closer. Robin hadn’t been able to stop himself from scanning the horizon, looking for incoming aircraft. God alone knew what was heading their way. “Sergeant…”

“Time for us to leave, then,” Robin said. The armed policemen might be a help, but it was far more likely that they’d just get in the way. It wasn’t as if they’d trained with the soldiers — hell, all the plans to hold major exercises had been curtailed by the shortage of cash. He remembered his wife, suddenly, and shivered. At least Helene was out of London, safely away from the chaos that had gripped the city. God alone knew how long it would be before the more rowdy element of the city’s population decided that it was a great opportunity for looting, raping and burning. “Get everyone back to the cordon and keep moving the civilians further away…”

He covered his ears as something *screeched* by overhead. A tiny black dot, seemingly flying as low as it could over London, flashed by and headed into the distance. No missiles arose to challenge it, although Robin had no way of knowing if the soldiers had held their fire or if they didn’t have enough antiaircraft missiles to spend them freely. Given how much it cost to produce equipment for the Met, he suspected the latter.

“Jesus Christ,” he whispered, as he started to run. He’d hoped that it was nothing more than a terrorist bombing, even though the officer he’d spoken to had seemed certain. “It’s really happening.”

* * *

Trooper Chris Drake perched on the roof of the Ministry of

Defence's Old Admiralty Building and peered down towards Green Park. Smoke was rising up from all over London, suggesting that the enemy — and he still found it hard to believe that the brass took the stories of little green men seriously — hadn't concentrated their attentions on Buckingham Palace. From what he'd heard before the CO had dispatched him and a handful of others to vantage points where they could see for some distance without being seen, the enemy had bombarded the railway stations and several junctions. The result of one attack away from the Palace was easy to see. Westminster Bridge had been hit by… *something* that had knocked it effortlessly into the water. Chris didn't need to be a CO to know that that ensured that it would be harder for any reinforcements to reach Whitehall. Of course, if some of the other stories he'd heard were true, there was little left *to* reach Whitehall.

He'd seen action in Afghanistan, but he'd never expected to have to fight a war in England — no one had. Some of the lads had been worried about their wives, girlfriends and children and in truth Chris knew that he couldn't blame them. The CO had worked hard to keep them focused on the incoming threat, but without it Chris suspected that some of his comrades would probably have seen to their own families. They'd expected months — perhaps years — of warning before Britain itself came under threat. No one had expected an attack that had crushed them under its treads within a few hours.

The sound of engines pulled his attention back to the here and now. One of the tech guys down on the streets below had been able to rig up a passive detection system — or so he'd heard — but radar coverage was a thing of the past. It was possible that their enemy — little green men or whatever — would manage to get tactical surprise, even though the troops were dug in about as well as they could given the short notice. He started scanning the skies with binoculars, looking for trouble. Who knew what alien landing craft would look like? Flying saucers, or something humanity might have built itself, or maybe even tiny blue boxes that were bigger on the inside. There were just too many possibilities.

When he finally caught sight of the craft heading towards London, he was almost disappointed. They were big, all right; larger than any aircraft he'd seen in his career, massive shapes that seemed oddly unsteady in the atmosphere. The wings seemed too stubby to keep the craft in the air, although the roar of their engines suggested that whatever was powering them was more advanced than anything on Earth. In fact, they reminded him of something out of *Thunderbirds*. Despite himself, he felt a little relieved. They might not be as badly outmatched as he'd feared. The thought of facing the aliens from *Independence Day* had scared hell out of the soldiers.

The craft roared closer, moving with deceptive ungainliness. He formed a mental picture of a SAM blasting one of them out of the air, but realised quickly that the CO would want to hold off on that if possible. God alone knew how much damage a crashing alien transport would do to London, or to the civilians who happened to be caught in the blast. He reached for his radio, checked the channel quickly, and keyed the switch twice. They'd discovered that they could beat the jamming to some extent, if they used higher frequencies. Chris suspected that the aliens might be relaxing the jamming — whatever they used to coordinate might not be too different from what the humans used — but it hardly mattered. The entire city would have seen those craft making their final approach.

They flew over Hyde Park and started to shower tiny objects down towards the park below. Chris peered at them through his binoculars, trying to make out shape and form. They looked like paratroopers, but there were no parachutes. He wondered if they'd smash themselves into bloody ruin on the ground below, before realising that they had to have some way to slow their fall. Some of the SAS operatives had talked about opening their parachutes at terrifyingly low levels, barely slowing their fall before they touched down.

Other paratroopers were falling now, heading towards St. James Park. Chris leaned forward as the first of the black objects touched the ground and straightened up. The sight was so surreal that, just for a moment, he was convinced that he had to be dreaming. He hadn't wanted to believe it, but it was true. The aliens had landed.

Chapter Five

London
United Kingdom, Day 1

Tra'tro The'Stig braced himself in the cramped confines of the landing shuttle as the pilot started to count off the final seconds. Like most of the other assault formations, Assault Landing Unit #352 had been tasked with decapitating the prey — the *humans*, he reminded himself — before they could rally their troops and counterattack. The *Kyg'pa* - the Land Force — had had plenty of experience carrying out assault landings on hostile worlds and much of that experience suggested that the prey were easier to beat if their leaders were dead. In all of the endless briefings after they'd been pulled out of their stasis pods, they'd been warned that the humans — although primitive — were dangerous. Anything that weakened them before their world was occupied and their new position as Workers of the State was explained to them was all right by the Land Force. The concerns passed down to them about capturing the human infrastructure intact were irritating. It meant that the starship crews were unlikely to fire down at the planet's surface without authorisation from the Command Triad.

He kept his concerns to himself. Anyone who served the State knew that dissent was not considered welcome, at least from the lower ranks. The people at the top had the right to determine everything from troop dispositions to attack strategy and they didn't need his input. If he kept working away, and survived the coming war, he might just reach the higher levels where he could actually influence policy. And it was just as likely that the humans would roll over and surrender without a shot being fired.

The alarm echoed through the transport as it started to slow down over the human city. The'Stig had seen images taken by spy drones during the briefings and had to admit that the humans didn't seem to know when to stop building. Their city seemed completely disorganised, while their buildings would be alarmingly tight for his soldiers. They'd probably have to start establishing their own headquarters on the surface rather than using human buildings, if only because of the size difference. Humans seemed to be shorter and thinner than his people and their buildings had been built for their comfort. They hadn't thought to widen them for their new masters.

He flinched as the drop field caught him and propelled his unresisting form towards the hatch, followed by the remainder of the Assault Landing Unit. As always, there was a moment of sheer terror

as he tumbled down towards the planetary surface, just before the counter-gravity field caught hold of his form and cancelled his motion, a mere second before he would have slammed face-first into the ground. Earth smelt funny — it was clear that the human disunion even affected their older cities — but he pushed that aside. The Assault Unit was spreading out, looking for trouble. Intelligence had stated that the humans had already lost their command and control networks, but the next thing Intelligence got right would be the first. They were really nothing more than well-connected officers who had the ability to avoid being assigned to front-line combat missions.

A dead human lay on the ground, not too far from his position. He glanced down at the body, recoiling in shock from its oddly-disjointed form. The humans looked as if they were permanently on the verge of falling over when they moved, with a suppleness that was alien to his people. A brief glance at the frontal area confirmed that they were looking at a male. There was no way to tell how the human had died.

The radio network hissed, suddenly. "Contact," it snapped. The sound of human weapons almost drowned the coordinator's voice out. "Engage and destroy!"

The'Stig cursed and dived for cover. Intelligence had made its usual flawed assessment — they'd landed right in the midst of a *Grisna* nest and the wretched little creatures were stinging like mad. Hefting his weapon, he led a small detachment forward, towards the buildings that served as the human centre of government. The human leaders were probably long gone, but taking their buildings would show their impotence. Or so Intelligence promised…

* * *

Chris Drake couldn't believe his eyes. He was still half-convinced that he was dreaming, perhaps after a night of too many curries or kebabs. The aliens — and they *had* to be aliens, not men in funny-fitting suits — were landing in St. James Park, right in front of him. He keyed the switch on the camera that should have sent a live feed back to the CO, wondering what the straight-laced officer would make of it all. The aliens… were very alien.

His first thought had been humanoid dinosaurs, but they moved with an eerie grace that belied their hulking forms. They were larger than humans, carrying weapons that looked too ungainly for humans to use, wearing camouflage uniforms that seemed to automatically blend with their surroundings. What little skin he could see was gray and leathery, reminding him of elephants in the jungle, but their eyes

were dark and very cold. Their faces seemed to be almost immobile, although he couldn't tell if they were naturally inscrutable or if he just couldn't recognise an alien expression when he saw it. One of them seemed to be the leader on the ground, using hand motions to advance his troops forward; the others seemed to be grunts. He reminded himself not to count them out too soon. The British Army used its best troops in the Air Assault Role and he had to assume that the same was true of the aliens.

He looked down at their weapons, trying to see what they were carrying. They didn't *look* that fancy, certainly not compared to weapons he'd seen in a hundred different alien invasion movies; indeed, he was sure that they weren't much more advanced than anything he'd seen on Earth. There was a crudeness about their design that reminded him of some of the makeshift weapons they'd pulled out of caves in Afghanistan, or weapons produced with a Russian eye towards functionality rather than appearance. Some of the weapons seemed to be almost portable machine guns; it struck him, suddenly, that they could probably carry more weight than the average human. Their transport aircraft were heading off in the distance…

The CO gave the order and the fighting began. A number of British soldiers had been positioned in nearby buildings, using them to pour fire down onto the hapless aliens, while a team of mortar gunners started to lop shells towards their landing zone. It was a shame that they hadn't had a few days to prepare, Chris thought, as he saw a couple of aliens hit the ground, dark blood staining the grass around their bodies. The Household Division had never expected to be fighting a major action in the heart of London. Some equipment that they'd used in Afghanistan was outside the city. It might as well be on the other side of the moon.

For a moment, he was sure that the aliens were doomed, before they started to return fire with surprising accuracy. Their handheld weapons had the same rate of fire as a GPMG and their aim was better than anyone would have expected. A pair of their leaders — he assumed, seeing they seemed to be in charge — were slipping forward, leading a direct assault against Whitehall. One of them was shot down by a sniper, while the other managed to take cover against a damaged car. It exploded a second later — the IED team had been putting their expertise to work — blowing the alien backwards. Chris watched dispassionately as it crashed back down to Earth and lay still, presumably stunned or dead. The remaining aliens had taken cover and were laying down fire towards the defenders. From what little Chris could pick up on his radio, they'd managed to pick off many of the soldiers through heavy fire. A handful of buildings were burning as alien grenades set fire to their interiors.

A dull roar echoed overhead as a second flight of alien transports roared down the Thames. This time, a team with a Stinger was cleared to engage the enemy craft, launching their missile at almost point-blank range. Whatever countermeasures the aliens had were ineffective at such a distance and the missile struck the alien craft on the side of its fuselage. For a moment, it seemed to have survived… and then it flipped over and came crashing down into the river. A colossal fireball blew up from where it had come down, throwing debris everywhere. If any aliens had survived, Chris couldn't see how they could get out of the water and into the fight. A second alien transport was hit just before it could start unloading its cargo. This one was damaged and managed to stagger away over London before coming down in the suburbs. Chris breathed a silent prayer for the civilians living where it had crashed before dragging his attention back to the main battlefield. The remaining alien transports had started to deploy alien tanks.

The British Army had considerable experience moving light armour around by air, but the aliens clearly had better technology than anything available to the Army Air Corps. Their tanks looked bigger and nastier than a Challenger II, although there was something funny about their design. It took him a moment to realise that they seemed to be lacking any treads, almost as if they were designed to be nothing more than moveable pillboxes. They hit the ground and bounced; Chris cursed as he realised that they were riding an air cushion, rather like small hovercraft. Each of the alien tanks started towards the defence line as soon as they landing, big guns rotating around with terrifying speed to challenge the puny humans ahead of them. They weren't completely dependent upon the big guns either, he saw. The alien tanks carried what looked like small machine guns, four to a tank. They probably could engage multiple targets simultaneously.

A streak of light announced that one of the antitank teams had engaged the nearest target. The alien tank stopped dead as the missile blasted through its upper armour and presumably killed the crew, but its comrades opened fire at once. Chris felt the building shake as they raked the windows with machine gun fire, while using their main guns to clear any large obstacles on the ground. The entire building seemed to be on the verge of collapse as a shell detonated inside; frantically, he scrambled backwards to the fire escape and started to slide down to safety. Judging by the noise, the aliens were responding to any attack with savage force. *They* didn't seem to have to worry about civilian casualties.

Cursing, he ran towards the rally point, just as the Old Admiralty Building started to collapse into a pile of rubble. Other soldiers joined

the retreat, falling back to regroup and reform the defence line — but would it be enough? They'd been warned to be ready to slip out into London and try to escape the alien dragnet. Perhaps the time had come to leave…

A thunderous roar sent him falling to his knees. Behind him, the aliens were advancing, carefully. The rubble slowed their pace, but it also provided cover for their infantry. At least they hadn't yet realised just how small humans were, compared to their hulking forms. Humans could hide themselves in places no alien could follow. A handful of soldiers were taking advantage of the confusion to use grenades to set up makeshift IEDs. The aliens might take Westminster, but they'd take nothing more than a pile of rubble — and a very bloody nose.

* * *

The'Stig ducked as a human bullet cracked just past his ear. He couldn't count just how many times he'd come close to death; the humans might have been small and puny, but they knew how to fight. If it hadn't been for the tankers, the Assault Unit might have been wiped out in the first hour of the assault. Even with the tankers, the humans were bleeding them hard. At least their backs were to the river, he told himself firmly. They'd have nowhere to run when the tanks closed in on their positions. Any rational species would have realised that the position was hopeless and sought terms.

He wasn't sure who was in command right now, not after the humans had taken down the transport carrying two superior officers and their mobile command network. The threat of human-portable weapons had clearly been underestimated, part of his mind noted, cursing Intelligence under his breath. Several units had been shredded, leaving him as the senior officer within eyesight. He didn't even know half of the troopers who had been drawn into his orbit. All he could do was keep them moving forward and hope that the tankers sucked up most of the incoming fire.

A pile of rubble allowed him a chance to slip under cover, just as one of the troopers saw what looked like a pile of metal discs on the ground. The'Stig was just a second too late in ordering him to stop; he picked the discs up and an explosion blew him into bloody fragments. Even their body armour couldn't protect them against such an attack. The'Stig scowled and inched backwards, eyes scanning the piles of rubble and peering through the smoke in hopes of seeing the humans before they saw him. The entire area could be mined, but he doubted that he'd be able to get a team of experts to come down and remove

the mines safely. Reporting their presence to his superiors — once they were appointed — would only mean that they'd be told to be careful. They needed to take the human leaders alive.

Something *moved*, right at the corner of his eye. Instinct sent him jumping backwards, just in time to avoid a knife thrown at him by a young male human. The human was wounded, he realised, and it had *still* attempted to take his life. Was the entire species insane? He fired a burst towards the human and watched bright red blood splash on the rubble. They looked so fragile and yet they could kill and kill and kill…

And they could hide. Hindsight, always clearer than foresight, showed him just what had happened. He'd ignored the human's hiding place because it was too small for one of his people. If he'd taken a longer look, he might not have been surprised so badly. And some of the other troopers who'd been ambushed might have remained alive, if they'd been more aware of what the humans could do to them. They'd have to learn quickly on this world.

He motioned for his troopers to hold their positions. The tankers were coming up behind them and more reinforcements were on the way. Let the tankers take a few bullets — which would only glance off their armour in any case. His troopers needed a rest before they pushed onwards — and besides, the humans were trapped against the river. They'd have to break through the assault lines to escape and *that* wasn't going to be easy.

* * *

"They're sending in their tanks, sir!"

Major-General Sir Alan Robertson nodded, sharply. After some thought, he'd established his command post in the Houses of Parliament, assuming that the aliens wanted to take Parliament relatively intact. They didn't seem to be *that* concerned about many of the other historic buildings in Central London, but it made sense. It would have been easy for them to take out the civilian government from orbit if they'd simply wanted them dead.

But his force was in an untenable position — which, he admitted to himself, he'd known about long before the aliens actually landed. The aliens seemed to be bringing in more reinforcements and their supplies of Stinger missiles were running low; it seemed that the aliens did have some form of effective countermeasure. Besides, he didn't want to shoot down another craft and see it crash in London. The team he'd positioned in the London Eye had reported that fires were spreading out of control from where one of the alien transports had

crash-landed.

"Send in the Javelin teams and tell them one shot each," he ordered, sharply. The British Army had ordered thousands of Javelin missiles, but most of them had been stockpiled in the countryside or deployed to Afghanistan. No one had thought to equip the Household Division with more than a handful of antitank weapons. Who in their right mind would have considered that they'd be needed? "And then tell them to head for the tunnels. They're to get out of the city and link up with the rest of the army."

The ground shook violently as the aliens started bombarding Whitehall. Alan swore under his breath, realising that the aliens were clearly using orbital or drone surveillance assets to track his men. Their advance was almost unstoppable now, particularly not with what remained of his two companies. There was no point in getting more men killed for nothing.

"Sound the retreat," he ordered. He keyed his radio and issued the command. "Get the lads out of here…"

High overhead, an alien drone detected the signal, locked onto his position and fired a single missile. Major-General Sir Alan Robertson died before realising that he was even in danger.

* * *

"We're to get out of here," a sergeant was yelling. "Move, you stupid…"

Chris picked himself up, just as the alien advance broke through one of the makeshift defence lines. He fired a quick burst from his SA80 in the hopes of slowing the aliens, just as he realised that they'd blocked him from reaching the tunnel that should have led down into safety. Before he had a moment to think about it, he turned and ran towards the embankment, jumping down into the Thames. The river would carry him downstream and he'd be able to link up with what remained of his unit once he got out of the water.

Behind him, London burned.

Chapter Six

London
United Kingdom, Day 1

"My God."

From his vantage point, Robin had been able to see some of the fighting — too much of the fighting. What he'd seen had left him silently grateful that he wasn't close enough to see the rest of it. The aliens had landed in force — two of their transports had been shot down, including one that had crashed into the other side of the Thames — and taken Whitehall. God alone knew how many soldiers had been killed in an ultimately futile last stand.

He looked down towards the streets. They had been emptying with remarkable speed as people fled the battle, heading towards their homes in the hope that they might find safety with their families and friends. Robin suspected that there was going to be no such thing as safety in London for the next few weeks, if not ever. What the hell did the aliens want? Part of him refused to believe that there *were* aliens, but the evidence was undeniable. The flames and smoke rising up in the distance suggested that the world had indeed turned upside down.

"Sergeant," one of the other policemen said, "what the hell do we do?"

Robin silently cursed him for asking that question. In truth, he had no idea *what* they should do, because the Met had never seriously considered that London might be invaded. The last time the British police had considered the question had been back during World War Two, when — if he recalled correctly — they'd been ordered to maintain public order, but avoid giving any help to the Germans. But the Germans had never invaded and the plans had never been put to the test. What would the aliens do now they'd won themselves a city?

His radio buzzed, suddenly. The jamming seemed to have stopped, suggesting… what? Logically, the aliens would have wanted to keep the police and military forces fragmented, but perhaps their own communications were affected by their jamming. Or perhaps they were going to be hunting down any remaining soldiers and hoped that some of them would be foolish enough to use their radios. Or perhaps… he pushed the thoughts aside as a cold voice, utterly inhuman, echoed out over the airwaves. The aliens were finally making their demands known.

"Attention," the voice said. "This is *Ju'tro* Oheghizh, speaking for the Eridian State. All humans are to pay careful attention to this message on pain of punishment. Planet Earth has been conquered and

is now part of the Eridian State. Your leaders have been captured or killed; your military forces have been scattered. Further resistance is futile. Accept your new position in the universe or you will be destroyed.

"All civilian humans are to remain within their homes until instructed to report to the occupation authorities," it continued. "Any attempt to impede the passage of my forces will result in severe punishment. Human military and police personnel are to turn themselves in to my forces. All weapons are to be surrendered to the occupation authorities. Failure to report will result in…"

"Severe punishment," Robin muttered. The aliens didn't seem to hide their intentions. There was no guff about coming to liberate humanity from human leaders; nothing, but naked force. And they'd already taken London. "And what happens if we report in?"

The message came to an end and then started to repeat itself. Robin listened a second time, but there were no differences — and no clue as to the fate of police and military personnel. If he recalled correctly, Iraq had collapsed into chaos partly because of the *absence* of a proper police force, yet the aliens might not care about chaos on the ground. Their attacks on London had shown a frightening lack of concern for civilian casualties. He glanced up as another alien transport roared overhead, dropping what looked like heavy crates towards the ground. They'd probably start pushing out from Westminster as soon as they felt strong enough to brave the surrounding city. God knew it wasn't as if there was much in the way to stop them.

"We go to the nearest police station," he said, finally. Scotland Yard might be gone, but it was far from the only police station in London. "We take the weapons and we conceal them somewhere before they think to secure the stations for themselves. And then we wait and see what happens next."

He watched as the policemen leapt to work, grateful that someone had finally told them what to do. Robin shook his head as they started to run through deserted streets, avoiding crashed and abandoned cars, hoping against hope that they would find someone more senior to issue further orders. He didn't have the slightest idea what to do next.

* * *

Ju'tro Oheghizh stepped off the shuttle and onto Earth, looking around him with ill-concealed interest. The humans seemed to have built habitations suitable for smaller creatures than themselves,

although many of their buildings had been levelled by the first wave of assault troopers. A handful of humans, several wounded, sat in the middle of the grassy park, watched by armed guards. It was difficult to read human expressions, but some of them were clearly watching his troopers and considering how best to escape. Others seemed to be completely unaware of their surroundings. The discovery that there were other races out among the stars was always a shock to planet-bound races, even ones who had conceived the possibility long before they reached into space. He doubted that the humans would be any different from the other races brought into the State. It would take time to hammer their new status into their heads.

"The lead assault units were badly hurt," *J'tra* Rahol reported, as soon as they exchanged salutes. "The humans fought bravely and well. We're still finding traps left behind in the ruins — their small size gives them an advantage that cost many of our lives before we adapted."

Oheghizh narrowed his snout. "And the surrendered humans?"

"Many appear to be in shock," his subordinate reported, as they walked into the makeshift command centre. Oheghizh had hoped to set up in the human buildings, but if the humans had had time to leave surprises behind them, it would be unduly risky. "I do not believe that we have captured any truly important humans. Their leaders appear to have fled before we landed in their city."

"Unsurprising," Oheghizh said. There had always been an awareness that the human leaders might have been able to get out of their city — London, they called it — before the assault force landed. Some of the Land Force Commanders had called for targeting the human leadership with strikes from orbit, but the Command Triad had overruled them. They needed to bring the humans into the State as quickly as possible and having their leaders alive would make that easier. It would take too long to rebuild human society directly. "Do we have any idea of their current location?"

Rahol tapped the computer display. "The humans appear to be attempting to regroup their forces to the west," he said. "A number of human military units apparently escaped destruction during the opening minutes of the bombardment, including a number of air defence units. We have targeted active sensor emitters from orbit, but they appear to have learned from experience and are keeping any remaining active sensors turned off. Their effectiveness will decrease rapidly as we have destroyed their bases and supply dumps."

He pointed one long finger at the human road network. "Our own forces are landing around the cities, trapping the human civilians within our grasp," he continued. "There have been a handful of engagements between our forces and human military units, but most

human units seem to be attempting to avoid contact. We have broadcast our demands for surrender on all human military and civilian channels. So far we have received no reply."

Oheghizh nodded, slowly. The humans were no doubt shocked by their sudden fall from power on their homeworld. Given time, they could probably regroup and launch a series of counterattacks that would cost the State dearly — and put a hold on his personal career ambitions. Logically, they needed to maintain the pressure as much as they could; practically, they needed to get set up on the ground before the naval forces surrounding Earth insisted on withdrawing most of the transports. The humans had managed to shoot down a number of shuttles, more than any of the planners had expected. Logistics were going to be weaker than anyone had expected when they'd drawn up the plans to invade Earth.

But it wouldn't last. The humans were just as dependent upon supplies to keep their forces moving as the State — and their supply dumps were flaming ruin. Their effectiveness would fall sharply over the next few days, leaving them without the ability to do more than harass his forces. And then they'd be in control and well on the way to turning Earth into a productive outpost. The humans were certainly more capable of labouring for the State than several other races he could mention!

"Keep grouping our forces for a push westwards," he ordered, finally. There was no way to know how the great mass of human civilians would react to their presence. The human government seemed to believe that keeping the civilian population disarmed was a good thing — although some of their measures had seemed so absurd he'd wondered if there was a translation problem — but it was clear that they'd never quite succeeded. Orbital observation indicated mass unrest in parts of the human city. It couldn't be tolerated. The Land Forces would have to open up the roads to allow supplies to be moved around the region. "And expand our patrol perimeter. I want the humans to feel our foot on their chest."

* * *

Garden House School had been a primary school yesterday, when the world had made sense and aliens were just figments of human imagination. Now, it had been turned into a makeshift medical centre, following emergency plans that had been drawn up sometime during the cold war. Classroom tables had been pushed together and covered with blankets, allowing the wounded somewhere to wait for treatment. Fatima wanted to close her eyes and rest, but there was no

time. The small number of medical staff in attendance were doing what they could, yet there seemed to be no end to the wounded. And the civilian volunteers were doing more harm than good. She bandaged up a wound that really needed an operation in a proper hospital, knowing that she might have condemned the patient to a slow and unpleasant death. Any half-trained doctor knew the value of a sterile environment, but they didn't have a hope of maintaining one in the school.

She removed her scarf as she saw the next patient, a small girl barely old enough to go to school. Her parents seemed to be in shock, pointing at their daughter's arm as if they expected Fatima to be able to know what was wrong just by looking. She always hated treating children — young children couldn't tell doctors what was really wrong with them — but there was no choice. She wrapped the scarf around the child's arm, turning it into a makeshift sling. It crossed her mind that her stepmother would be horrified to see her in public with her hair uncovered and she almost broke down into helpless giggles. After everything else that had happened since the first explosions, it was almost a relief to worry about something so petty.

"She's in pain," the mother insisted. "Can't you give her something for the pain?"

Fatima shook her head, grimly. The school had had a well-stocked medical room, but they'd used almost all of the painkillers within the first hour. They'd sent runners to the nearest hospital in the hopes of getting more, yet none of the runners had returned. Fatima's superiors had been reduced to urging policemen to take painkillers from nearby shops, along with what other medical supplies they could find. And there still seemed to be no end to the wounded. Leaving a child in pain tore at her heart, but what else could they do?

She heard the sound of screaming from outside and closed her eyes. London had had riots before, but what would happen with an alien invasion force in the heart of the city? She breathed a silent prayer as the sound of gunshots echoed out in the distance, followed by a faint humming that seemed to echo in the back of her head. One of the doctors walked over to the classroom door and peered down the corridor. He jumped back, his face white as a sheet.

"They're coming," he said. His legs buckled and he collapsed on the floor. "They're coming!"

Fatima braced herself as the first of the aliens came into view. It was clear that the alien — she couldn't tell if it was male or female — seemed to be having trouble in corridors designed for humans. The weapon it carried in one hand looked too large to be carried by a human, although she had to admit that she knew almost nothing about weapons. Dark eyes, seemingly without any colours at all,

peered around the room. Fatima met them for a second and was struck by just how *alien* the alien seemed to be. It turned and headed onwards, followed by a small number of other aliens. Fatima realised, as she felt her own legs give way, that they were expanding outwards. God alone knew what they'd do when they ran into resistance…

And, despite herself, she hoped that they would place the makeshift hospital under guard. If London really did dissolve into chaos, the hospitals and chemists would be among the first places targeted for drugs. Who knew *how* the aliens would react to rioters?

* * *

Building by building, the advancing assault unit swept through the human city. Outside their government centre, it seemed that there had been no time to rig traps or other surprises, although *Tra'tro* The'Stig knew better than to take anything for granted. His superiors had noted his achievement in the first battles by granting him a lead role in the expansion, along with reinforcements that had been dispatched from orbit. It was a honour he would happily have foregone. The oddly misshapen humans seemed either curious or terrified of his patrol; he watched in amusement as some ran away, while others just stared at them as if they'd never seen a non-human before. He shifted his weapon towards one of the humans who was paying too much attention to them in hopes of scaring the little creature away. The human emitted a high-pitched whine and fled.

The humans had abandoned many of their vehicles in positions that made it harder for the tankers to advance in support of the ground troops. Two of the tanks had already started pushing human vehicles to one side, but the remainder were holding back, nervous about the consequences of meddling with alien technology. Besides, the humans had shown a flair for creating traps and no tanker wished to lose his vehicle to a mere improvised bomb. The'Stig cursed them under his breath, even as he saw another group of humans ahead of him. They were staring at his patrol as if they couldn't believe their eyes…

A human voice yelled a command and the first projectiles crashed down around them. The'Stig's first thought was that they were under attack by human soldiers, but they were throwing glass bottles and stones rather than grenades and bullets. A moment later, one of the bottles crashed down on top of a trooper's head, sending him sprawling down onto the road. The humans might not be soldiers, but they could harm his troopers. Their defiance could not be tolerated.

He snarled as he pulled down on the firing trigger and sprayed

bullets over the humans within eyesight. They fell to the ground in bloody heaps, their comrades suddenly running back as if they'd realised that it wasn't a good idea to challenge the occupation force. The'Stig refused to let them go easily; he lunged forward, firing burst after burst as he moved. The attack ended almost as quickly as it had begun, with a number of humans dead and two of his troopers mildly injured. He silently made a note to praise the body armour in his report. If they hadn't been so well-protected, they would have certainly had more injured, if not dead.

"Advance," he ordered, sharply.

The force continued on its way, coordinating with other groups as they pressed out along the human roads. It dawned on him suddenly that they weren't really controlling the city at all, merely the main roads they intended to use for transporting supplies. They simply didn't have the numbers to maintain control over the entire city. After a moment of thought, he kept that insight to himself. His superior officers no doubt knew all about it and intended to deal with the humans in another manner. Their city was dependent upon food supplies from outside, wasn't it? They could simply be starved to death if they refused to cooperate.

He smiled darkly as the first assault drone hummed overhead, watching for further human ambushes. The humans who had escaped the brief engagement — if he dignified the one-sided massacre by calling it an engagement — would spread the word. Any attempts to slow the occupation force would not be tolerated. Maybe the humans would learn quickly enough that the occupation force could relax.

The drone reported what looked like another ambush up ahead. He checked his weapon as the force moved carefully onwards, ready to deal with the ambush when it was triggered. The humans would learn — or they would die. In the end, he told himself firmly, Earth would belong to the State. The only real question was how many humans would have to die before the rest realised that they had no choice, but to submit.

Chapter Seven

Long Stratton
United Kingdom, Day 1

"I saw you come down," a voice called. Alex barely heard him. "Are you all right?"

Alex shook her head. Her entire body was shaking with post-combat stress. She'd left RAF Coningsby expecting nothing more challenging than a routine patrol and an attempt to intercept one of the mysterious 'ghosts.' Well, the ghosts weren't a mystery any more, were they? They belonged to the bastards who had blown Davidson out of the sky and shot her down, whoever they were. She'd practiced ejecting before, but she'd never had to eject from a Typhoon in the midst of a battle… she cursed her own weakness as she tried to stand up. Her legs refused to cooperate and she stumbled before grasping the proffered hand gratefully.

"I… thank you," she managed. Normally, a pilot bailing out of an aircraft would have been tracked by ground-based radar stations and a SAR helicopter dispatched from the nearest base. Now, she had the unpleasant feeling that the rest of the RAF had more important things to worry about than a single Typhoon pilot. The explosions she'd seen as she drifted down to the field suggested that the entire country was under attack. "Do you have a mobile phone?"

"I tried to call an ambulance when I saw your parachute," the farmer said. He looked older than her father, but there was a toughness around him that reminded her of the RAF Regiment soldiers who guarded the RAF's airbases. His face was tanned by the sun. "There's no signal at all."

Somehow, Alex wasn't surprised. The unknowns — whoever they were — had to have taken out the communications satellites, as well as jamming ordinary radio frequencies. There was no reason why they couldn't jam mobile phones as well. She cursed under her breath as she realised that she wasn't entirely sure where she was, or how to report in to whatever remained of her unit. The country was at war and she had enlisted to defend it. She needed to return to the base. And that might be impossible.

"I can take you down to the farm," the farmer offered. He held out a calloused hand. "My name's Giles, Giles Smith. I own the land about here."

"Alex," Alex offered, as they shook hands. "I didn't mean to land on your farm…"

"Don't worry about it," the farmer said. He frowned, for a long

moment. “I don’t suppose you know what those flashes I saw in the distance were?”

Alex filled him in on what little she knew as they walked down towards the farmhouse. It was a neat little building, surrounded by a field of sheep and cows, almost like something from a bygone era. She would have been charmed if she hadn’t been so worried about the situation — and the smell from the fields. The people who suggested that humanity should abandon technology and go back to the land had never smelled the countryside. *She* was happy with air conditioning and filtering.

Inside, she allowed the farmer’s wife to give her a cup of tea while she tried to call the base. The telephone line buzzed and clicked alarmingly, and then went dead, without even a dial tone. At Smith’s suggestion, she tried the internet and was pleasantly surprised to discover that the farmhouse had broadband. Smith explained, when she asked, that the farmhouse often played host to young people and they all demanded internet access.

“And the wife likes watching streaming video from London,” he added with a wink. “I know better than to get in her way.”

Alex smiled as she tried to access MILNET through the internet connection. It should have accepted her password and allowed her access, but the link seemed to keep dropping out, as if some of the network nodes were malfunctioning. The unknown enemy had launched their attack without being detected, at least until it was far too late. There was no reason why they couldn’t have launched a cyber-attack as well and taken out most of the military’s secure network. The pilots had briefed that that was supposed to be impossible, but the unknowns had done far too much that should *also* have been impossible.

Finally, the system blinked up a warning; enemy troops in London and several other cities. Alex stared at the screen, not quite believing her eyes. How could *anyone* have simply landed in London? Where the hell was the rest of the RAF? The thought — the thought that she had been trying to avoid — floated back to the surface of her mind. She’d been blown out of the sky, along with her wingman. It was quite possible that the remainder of the RAF had met the same fate, or had been caught and destroyed on the ground. Who the hell were they fighting?

A set of general orders, directed to soldiers and TA reservists, flickered into existence. They were ordered to make their way out of the cities and rendezvous with officers at certain locations, each referred to with a different codename. Alex stared at them, before realising that whoever had taken command of the British military wouldn’t have wanted to put their instructions on the military

network, no matter how secure it was supposed to be. The unknowns were probably monitoring every move they made.

But *she* had no idea where to go. The RAF had never anticipated needing to establish covert rendezvous points, certainly not since the end of the Cold War. She could find a list of military bases online, yet the chances were good that they had been destroyed or attacked and occupied by the unknowns. The unknowns… their enemy didn't even have a face! Who the hell were they fighting?

She clicked on one of the options and an answer, of sorts, floated up in front of her eyes. Aliens. It seemed impossible, but so did the ghosts — the ghost aircraft that had blown her out of the sky and killed her wingman. She covered her eyes for a long moment, feeling the world spinning around her, and then looked back up at the screen. The damning words were still there.

"Aliens," she whispered. How long had it been since she'd watched the television show where the RAF had accidentally shot down a UFO, only to find themselves caught in the middle of a war between two alien races? Years… she'd been a child at the time. "It's not possible…"

But she could think of no other possible explanation.

Smith came back into the room and she filled him in, leaving out nothing. The farmer listened carefully, without interrupting, and then nodded. "I suspected as much," he admitted, after she'd finished. "The BBC has been raving about monsters in London. They must have seen the aliens…"

"But what do they *want*?" Alex asked, helplessly. "What does puny Earth have that they might want for themselves?"

"I have no idea," Smith said. He shrugged. "Listen; I have to go to the Parish Council and tell them what's going on. God alone knows what's going to happen if London's been occupied and we have to see to the crops. Lots of people might come running out of the cities and heading for the farms. I'd like you to come with me."

Alex hesitated, and then nodded just as her stomach rumbled loudly. "Have something to eat first," Mrs Smith said, firmly. "And you as well, Giles. You don't eat enough as it is."

* * *

Alex had never been to Long Stratton before, but Smith was happy to fill her in as they rumbled into the town and headed towards the Town Hall. Long Stratton was a civil parish with a population of roughly three thousand people, many of whom seemed to be thronging the streets as if they expected answers to be handed down

from above. It struck her that many people around the country would have only seen explosions or heard thunderclaps, or perhaps listened to the ranting from the BBC — and wouldn't have the slightest idea of what was going on. How long would it be, she asked herself, before confusion turned into panic? And how long would it be before the aliens made their demands known to humanity?

Smith parked by the Town Hall and nodded towards the old-style stone church. "There'll be hundreds of people there, seeking guidance," he said, softly. "Everyone knows everyone else here, not like in the big cities. We have a real community here, despite everything London can do to ruin it. Little green men aren't going to take this place from us without a fight."

Alex kept her opinions to herself. Some of the farmers would have shotguns, or hunting rifles, but most of the population would be unarmed. It was quite possible that they could produce Molotov Cocktails and other makeshift weapons, yet how could they stand up to the alien onslaught? The defenders of Long Stratton and its sister towns might just be marking themselves for extermination. What was her duty to them if they decided to challenge the aliens directly?

Smith led her into the Town Hall after a brief chat with the policeman standing outside, looking rather worried. Alex saw his hand toying with his radio and realised that the police in Long Stratton had been cut off from London by alien jamming. She thought about telling him what she knew, and then realised that it would be pointless. He couldn't do anything about it, but panic. Shaking her head, she allowed Smith to lead her into a small room. Three men were gathered there, looking deeply worried. She smiled inwardly as they saw her uniform and frowned, uncertain what to make of her presence. God alone knew what she was going to tell them.

"This is the Parish Council, or as much of them as could be assembled," Smith said, without preamble. "Rupert Leigh; Tory MP for his sins, but a good man outside politics." A tall thin man nodded impatiently. "Timmy Simpson; used to farm quite a bit, but now pretty much retired." Simpson snorted, making a gesture with his fingers that suggested counting money. He was an older man, with a hunch that suggested that he was bowed under some great weight. "And the Reverend Macpherson, shepherd of our little flock."

"I should be in the Church," Reverend Macpherson said, shortly. "People need to come together and pray to God for guidance."

Smith nodded and started to outline what he'd heard from Alex, starting with the story of how he'd found her in his field. Halfway through, when he reached the bit about aliens, all three of the councillors stared at her. They looked as if they wanted to call in the policeman and have the pair of them arrested for public drunkenness.

Smith finished by reminding them of some of the more hysterical statements on the BBC — "we live in strange times," he said.

"I wish I didn't believe you," Leigh said. His voice had an upper-class edge that reminded Alex of a certain breed of officer. They'd sounded as if they'd been absolutely certain about everything too. "But aliens… dear God, what are we going to do when we tell the people?"

"We shall inform them in the Church," the Reverend said. "They will have time to reflect on God's will instead of panicking."

Leigh snorted. "But what are we going to *do*?"

Alex had been giving the matter some thought. "They made us study recent military history back when I was a trainee pilot," she said. "The first few hours after an invasion are always the most dangerous for ordinary people, because the occupation force will be on edge and unsure of its ground. You may not see very many aliens this far from London, or they may decide to take stock of the entire country. I think you need to consider what you're going to do when they arrive — and what you're going to do about others."

She scowled. "Right now, London and a dozen other cities are war zones," she continued. "The population is going to start fleeing the cities and heading for the countryside. You're not that far from Norwich — and that's got upwards of three hundred thousand people who will find themselves starving very quickly. What happens when they start flooding the farms? You have food here — and animals that can be slaughtered for human consumption. What are you going to do when they arrive?"

"There's the police," Leigh said, slowly.

"I think you have to assume that the police and the military have been knocked on the head," Alex said. She didn't want to admit it, but it was quite possible. "Even if there is still a working government and military out there, they are going to have more on their hands than helping you. You need to start planning for the worst."

"Good God," Leigh said. He stared down at the table, helplessly. "I don't think that there *is* anything we can do if the situation is that bad. We can't hold back swarms of starving humans…"

"We may have no choice," Simpson said, flatly. "Do you want to wait and see your families starving because you gave all your food to refugees?"

"I would remind you," the Reverend said sharply, "that charity is your duty towards your fellow man. Remember the parable of the Good Samaritan."

"The Good Samaritan," Simpson replied, "was in no danger."

He shook his head, slowly. "We may be in serious trouble anyway," he warned. "It isn't as if we keep stockpiles of food and

seeds out here — normally, we could just order the supplies when we needed them. How dependent are we on the rest of the world? International trade is probably shot to hell."

"No doubt," Alex agreed.

"Then we put it to the vote," Leigh said. "We can speak to the people in the Church — ask them to work together to safeguard our farms and the rest of our property. And then we can hope that this whole crisis is just going to blow over."

"Hark at him," Simpson crowed. He laughed, unpleasantly. "Stupid politicians *always* think that the world will go back to normal if they just keep their eyes closed long enough. The country has been *invaded*, you idiot! Even if the army does manage to give those thieving bastards a damn good thrashing, do you think that *anything* is going to be the same ever again? Really? I want some of whatever you've been smoking."

Leigh reddened, but he somehow managed to keep his voice calm. "If the worst does happen, we're probably doomed," he said. "I refuse to stop hoping for the best even as I try to prepare for the worst."

"Typical politician," Simpson said. He looked up at Alex, amused malice glinting in his brown eyes. "You want to bet that we're all dead a week from today?"

"That will do," the Reverend said. He stood up from the table. "I believe that it is time to sound the bells and summon the townspeople to the Church. We can tell them what we know and then we can decide what to do." He looked over at Alex. "I'd like you to remain at hand. You may be needed to answer questions."

"I don't know what else I can tell you," Alex admitted. "I've told you everything I know."

Simpson shrugged. "Some people will probably feel better knowing that someone in a uniform is telling them not to worry," he said. "Back in the War" — it took Alex a moment to realise that he meant the Second World War — "they used to tell us to keep calm and carry on. And we did too."

"You lived out here, safe on your farm," Smith pointed out, with some amusement. It was clear that he and Simpson were old friends. "I think the people in the Blitz probably felt a little different."

"I have no doubt of it," Simpson said. He looked up at Alex. "After the meeting in the Town Hall, let me know if you decide to stick around. I have some items you may be interested in using."

* * *

The announcement and discussion in the Church was just as bad

as Alex had feared. Nearly two hundred people had crammed themselves into the building and they all wanted to talk. The children had picked up on their parents' emotions and looked fearful, apart from the ones too young to know that something was wrong. Alex found herself targeted by irate people who wanted to know what had happened to the RAF, or why the invasion had been allowed to take place. After trying to point out twice that she had been taken completely by surprise, she did her best to ignore the louder protesters. It wasn't as if there was anything else she could do.

"We can survive this if we all pull together," Leigh said, once the general panic had calmed down slightly. The sheer unreality of the situation helped, although the BBC had clearly managed to cause panic in some quarters. One report claimed that London and Manchester had been occupied by giant elephants. Alex couldn't help, but feel that little gray aliens would have been more traditional. "We don't know what's going to happen, but we *will* get through it all."

The crowd didn't ask for specifics, luckily. Alex allowed herself a moment of relief that it seemed to be quietening down, even though she wasn't sure what she wanted to do now. Where did she go to report in? RAF Coningsby was almost certainly destroyed — or occupied by alien forces. The RAF had been taken completely by surprise.

She stepped outside and looked up at the darkening sky. An entire day had gone by and she'd barely noticed. High overhead, the stars were coming out — and there were a handful of trails burning their way down towards Earth. The remains of humanity's pathetic space program, she assumed. Some of the other lights would be alien starships…

In the distance, she heard the sound of thunder and shuddered.

The night no longer felt safe.

Chapter Eight

Salisbury Plain
United Kingdom, Day 1

"Prime Minister?"

Gabriel shook himself awake, surprised that he'd managed to fall asleep. After they'd left London, they'd followed the Thames upstream, with only minor delays caused by bridges that the aliens had targeted from orbit. A couple of hours later, they'd left the boat and transferred themselves to a Land Rover Butcher had recovered from somewhere. Reading between the lines, Gabriel guessed that the vehicle had been stolen, but he had found it difficult to care. Exhaustion had overwhelmed him soon afterwards.

They had parked in the midst of woodland, with the vehicle half-hidden under the trees. A small group of armed soldiers wearing camouflage uniforms had surrounded the vehicle, glancing around nervously as they waited for the Prime Minister to disembark. Gabriel knew very little about the military, but he could tell that the soldiers were worried. No matter how he looked at the situation, there seemed little cause for optimism. A day ago, he'd been Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Now… his position as Prime Minister seemed almost meaningless. No Prime Minister had ever had to flee London for fear that enemy troops would capture or kill him. Even Charles I had managed a reasonably dignified departure from his former capital.

Butcher led him into the woods, down towards a small concrete building marked PRIVATE, KEEP OUT. The soldier opened the door, revealing a ladder leading down into the depths of the Earth. Unwilling to show fear in front of the soldiers, Gabriel followed him down and realised to his relief that the lower levels of the bunker were properly lit. A uniformed soldier was waiting for him. The man looked deeply worried, but relieved when he saw the Prime Minister.

"Prime Minister," the soldier said. "I'm Brigadier Gavin Lightbridge-Stewart. Welcome to the bunker."

Gabriel followed the Brigadier as he led the way through a hatch into a large concrete room. It seemed primitive compared to some of the other emergency facilities he'd seen over the years, clearly not a facility that had been intended to return to active service. A number of maps had been scattered on the table, with red lines drawn on them by a handful of military personnel. Several more officers were working what looked like an older set of radios, trying to get back in touch with the rest of the world. Oddly, Gabriel felt a pang of relief as he took in the scene. The situation was bad — disastrous — but

experienced personnel were trying to come to grips with it. They might not be so outmatched after all.

"Please, be seated," the Brigadier said. "I have a military brief for you, but you might prefer a shower and a change of clothes — and a hot meal. The situation is unlikely to change in the next few hours."

Gabriel hesitated. In truth, he wanted the shower, and some food, and a few more hours of sleep. But he needed to know what was going on before he could come to grips with the situation. Perhaps they could find out what the aliens actually wanted — assuming they wanted anything. If invasion and settlement was their goal, surely they'd have some kind of plan to deal with the human governments. He remembered the report that alien craft were heading towards London — the craft they'd seen as they headed upriver — and shuddered. The aliens had made at least one of their goals quite clear.

"I'd like the briefing first," he said, finally. The Brigadier nodded, as if he understood perfectly. Neither of them could do much to influence the situation, but they couldn't just rest while the entire country was in danger. "How much do we actually know about what's going on out there?"

The Brigadier tapped one finger on the maps. "Most of our military communications network has been badly hammered," he said. "We never anticipated the physical destruction of the network nodes or the satellite network orbiting the planet, although most of the hardwired connections — the land lines — are undamaged. Our intelligence is therefore very limited and changes frequently, but I've had several intelligence and signals units working on what we do have and trying to put together a comprehensive picture."

His expression darkened. "The aliens — whoever they are, whatever they want — have clearly not limited their attentions to us," he added. "We have intermittent contact with the Americans and they confirm that Washington has been invaded; we also picked up a brief report from a French military unit that implied that Paris had also been hit. I'm afraid that we have been unable to make contact with American or French government officials — the outlook, Prime Minister, isn't good."

Gabriel nodded, bitterly. He'd hoped that they would be able to call on NATO for support, but it was clear that NATO had fragmented, with the national military forces on the run — fighting their own hopeless battles. The American President was a friend and he'd managed to make some progress in talking to the French President… what had happened to them after the aliens landed? America was so powerful that he assumed that the aliens had devoted much of their attention to smashing them flat. It was quite possible that the President and everyone else in their line of succession was dead.

"We have been attempting to make contact with personnel in Europe — we have officers at NATO Headquarters and a British Army base in Germany — but so far attempts have proven fruitless," the Brigadier said. "I think we have to assume the worst; the units have been destroyed or scattered. Parts of the internet are still working and we may be able to establish contact, but…"

He shook his head. "Overall, Prime Minister, the news is about as bad as it can get," he continued. "From what reports we have received, the Royal Navy has been effectively destroyed from orbit. We've picked up witness reports of warships being hit by missiles or kinetic energy weapons, leaving them ablaze and sinking. There are reports that suggest that many large container ships have also been sunk. We assume that the other major naval forces have also been destroyed, but we've heard nothing apart from a brief internet message from Toulon reporting a sinking carrier."

"My God," Gabriel said. How many sailors had died before they'd even known that they were under attack? "What about the air force?"

"The RAF has lost most of its bases to orbital strikes," the Brigadier said. "The aliens have been dropping in on some of the bases and converting them — I suspect — to bridgeheads. I've issued orders for material to be removed from the remaining bases before the aliens arrive and take possession — the RAF Regiment has orders to briefly engage them and then withdraw before they can be destroyed by superior firepower. A handful of aircraft survived the first strikes and attempted to hit back at the aliens, but results were… not optimum. The aliens have also been landing on civilian airports and deploying their forces to take up positions on the ground. Our ability to impede them is very limited."

He waited, perhaps expecting Gabriel to say something, but there was nothing to say. "They also bombarded most — not all — of the army garrisons in the country," he concluded. "Damage was very significant, but enough soldiers survived to allow us to begin preparations for underground war — if necessary. I've had teams of soldiers return to the damaged bases and remove as much equipment and weaponry as we can from storage — as well as rounding up soldiers, reservists, and anyone with military experience who is willing to volunteer. I suspect that the aliens won't leave us alone here much longer — they have to know that we're attempting to regroup."

Gabriel shivered. "Brigadier… I need a honest answer," he said. The Brigadier looked oddly insulted by the question. "Can we stop them if they come here?"

"Unlikely," the Brigadier admitted, after a moment. He drew out a line on the map. "I have positioned our remaining armour — that's Challenger II tanks, the best tanks in the world — in positions where

they can give the aliens a bloody nose when they come westwards. They're backed up by antiaircraft weapons, small antitank teams and a whole series of booby traps. We can and we will give them a bloody nose, Prime Minister, but we can't stop them. They have complete air supremacy and the ability to drop rocks on us from space. A straight fight will be disastrous for us."

"I never claimed to be a military man," Gabriel said, slowly, "but why are you talking about fighting them if you can't stop them?"

The Brigadier frowned. "Prime Minister… in recent years, we have had to operate on reduced logistics that have, quite frankly, cost lives. Normally, we would be able to draw ammunition, fuel and spare parts from our deports on the mainland, although we could never afford the stockpiles that we believed to be necessary for modern warfare. Military units burn through their supplies at terrifying speeds, even under the best of circumstances. Right now, our logistics train has effectively been destroyed. I imagine that we will become unable to operate the tanks within the next week. And, of course, they have eyes in the sky. They'd be able to detect us moving the tanks and blow them away from orbit.

"What that means is that our *best* chance for actually hurting them badly is now," he added. "From what we've seen of their armour in London — we managed to get pictures from the battle — we should be able to give them a rough reception. Our tankers have been given orders to hit the enemy hard, then fall back and abandon their vehicles. We should be able to make them more careful about advancing into unsecured territory while we prepare our fallback option."

Gabriel shook his head slowly. Yesterday, he'd been thinking about the economy. Now he was forced to think about war raging across England's green and pleasant land. It should have been unthinkable. He rubbed the side of his head, feeling a headache pounding inside his skull. How could anyone come to grips with what was tearing the country — the world — apart?

He looked up at the military officer. "And what do we do after they've smashed our tanks?"

"The only thing we can do," the Brigadier admitted. "We fight an underground war — an insurgency — until they decide that humans are too dangerous to keep as slaves."

"But…" Gabriel stopped, unsure if he should believe his ears. The thought of waging an insurgency against the invaders was romantic in the abstract, but in the real world he *knew* it would be horrific. God alone knew how the invaders would react to insurgents — human history showed a wide range of possible alternatives. Hell, for all he knew the invaders had technology that would allow them to read

human thoughts or track human soldiers by their scent. “Can we hope to win?”

“I don’t know,” the Brigadier said. “All I can say is that it seems to be the only alternative — unless we want to raise the white flag and surrender.”

Gabriel settled back into his chair, feeling the strength flowing out of his body. Surrender? Winston Churchill had rejected the very idea of surrender, insisting that Britain would fight on the beaches and fields and streets — but Churchill had known that invading Britain would be a monumental task for Adolf Hitler. Would his attitude have been different, Gabriel asked himself, if the Nazis had actually landed? Europe had seen bitter fighting in towns and cities, but Britain had been spared. But now… the aliens had succeeded where a long string of enemies had failed. They’d landed in England and the remains of the British military was on the run.

And yet… what did the aliens have in mind for humanity? He’d wracked his brains, but he hadn’t been able to come up with one solid reason for an advanced alien race to invade the Earth. All they could take from Earth was humans — and surely if they were advanced enough to cross the gulf between stars, they were advanced enough to make machines that would replace slaves. Maybe they were just mindless monsters, intent on exterminating all other races, but then they could have just dropped rocks from orbit. Or maybe there was something he was missing. If only he wasn’t so tired…

“I don’t know what to do,” he admitted. He cursed himself a moment later, for forgetting the one thing that should have been a priority. “What’s happening with the civilian population?”

The Brigadier’s expression hardened. “The aliens have come down in force around London, Manchester and a dozen other cities,” he said. “From the reports we’ve had, they’ve been refusing to allow anyone to leave and they’re backing up that refusal with live ammunition. Other parts of the country have seen riots and unrest — I think that they’re only going to get worse as people realise that the government has been crippled. We’re trying to get reservists out of the cities, but…”

He shook his head. “I’m afraid it’s going to get worse, Prime Minister,” he added. “It won’t be long before we see starvation. God alone knows how many people are going to die.”

Gabriel silently cursed his predecessors — and himself. Over the years, Britain had become increasingly dependent upon food imported from overseas — upwards of fifty percent of British food came from outside the country. And with the global trading network shot to hell by the aliens, there were likely to be shortages very quickly. The damage the aliens had inflicted on Britain’s road and rail networks wouldn’t make distributing what was left any easier. There had been

calls to establish a national strategic food reserve that would allow the government to feed the people, if necessary, but successive governments had chosen to avoid the issue rather than pay for the necessary precautions.

"We never planned for this sort of global outrage," he admitted. Perhaps, he added to himself, because the prospects were so horrifying. "What do we do about it?"

"I don't think we *can* do much about it," the Brigadier said. "I think that we will have to hope that the aliens choose to feed our population — we sure as hell can't do it for ourselves."

Gabriel tried to find some of Churchill's determination within himself, but it seemed impossible to believe that there was any hope of victory — or even survival. His position as Prime Minister was meaningless…

"Have a rest," the Brigadier advised. "I have teams working on our long-term plans — it's possible that the aliens will give us enough time to lay the groundwork for a long-term insurgency."

"Or they won't," Gabriel said. He pulled himself to his feet. The room seemed to be spinning around him and he was suddenly aware of the people covertly watching him. He had to be strong for them, he told himself firmly. It didn't help. "If we can't beat them, Brigadier, what's the point of even fighting?"

* * *

Brigadier Gavin Lightbridge-Stewart watched, his face impassive, as the Prime Minister's bodyguards helped him down the narrow corridor. There was a small selection of rooms under the bunker, where he could have a shower and a long sleep — God knew he needed it. The man wasn't a soldier and hadn't even considered the possibility that he might find himself on the run; for all the bellyaching about British politicians and the seemingly endless scandals, Britain wasn't Afghanistan or one of the other countries where political leaders knew to keep a bag packed for flight at all times.

He looked down at the map on the table, trying to force himself to remain optimistic. The situation was grim, but the reports from London made it clear that the aliens weren't gods. They seemed to have a slight shortage of force fields, directed energy weapons and all the other miracle technology that any self-respecting fictional alien race should possess. In fact, some of their technology looked to be *inferior* to human tech — although there was no way to be sure. The analysts had taken a look at the images of the alien landing shuttles

and concluded that they shouldn't fly, at least with any technology known to mankind. Their best guess was that the aliens had some form of negating gravity. The shuttles actually seemed to be more fragile than human craft. They'd been hit with Stingers and blown out of the air.

How long do we have? He asked himself. They'd been spoiled by modern technology. The fog of war, once banished by overhead reconnaissance and satellite imagery, was back with a vengeance. There was no way to know what the aliens were doing — at least until the scouts were in position to start reporting back. And the aliens could presumably track their radio transmissions and direct their aircraft to pick them off…

The Prime Minister had looked as if he was on the verge of collapse. Gavin couldn't blame him; no one, in their worst nightmares, had imagined an alien invasion. He didn't want to *think* about what the civilian population was feeling, looking out into the darkening sky and wondering what would happen to them now that their country had been invaded. Britain had been a good place to live for many; now… now it might become a nightmarish alien-ruled land. Or perhaps the aliens would choose to work through human proxies.

He shook his head. There was no way to know.

Passing command of the bunker to one of his subordinates — who had been commanding a troop of tanks until Gavin had pulled him out to serve in the bunker — he headed for the ladder up to the surface. He could inspect the defence lines and chat with the soldiers, just to see how they were coping with the situation. And he could start laying the groundwork for underground resistance. The PM might swing towards coming to an accommodation with the aliens, but Gavin had other ideas. His country had been invaded.

He wasn't going to let that pass without a fight.

Chapter Nine

London
United Kingdom, Day 2

Westminster looked like a war zone.

No, Alan Beresford, Member of Parliament for Haltemprice, corrected himself. It *was* a war zone. Alan prided himself on his cynical approach to life — it had certainly served him well in politics — but even he felt a pang as he saw the damage the aliens had inflicted on the heart of the British Government. The Houses of Parliament were scorched — by the aliens or their human defenders — and Big Ben had collapsed inward on itself. There had been hundreds of dead bodies scattered about, but from what he'd heard the aliens were collecting them up and disposing of them. He didn't want to think about *how*.

At thirty-five, Alan had been in politics for most of his life. His father had been a well-connected MP who had arranged for his son to receive employment within the office of another MP, who had in turn opened up a whole series of doors for his friend's son. Alan knew little about the world outside politics and cared less. All he cared about was the chance to make money, increase his personal power base and pass his legacy on to his son. He'd dreaded the prospect of an effective Prime Minister in Ten Downing Street for a long time — the thought of someone like Thatcher taking a look at his hidden secrets was terrifying — and he'd done a great deal to keep the position in the hands of a pathetic non-entity. Alan no longer believed in Britain, but then — why should he? The great British population, blessed with the gift of democracy, freely chose to elect men with few real qualifications for government — and then blamed those men for what they did to the country. No one had ever really held Parliament to account for a very long time.

But now… the world had changed overnight. Aliens had arrived, real aliens. Alan hadn't seen any of the battle at first hand, not when he'd been cowering in his upmarket flat fearing that every second might be his last. He'd believed that it was more likely to be terrorists and the BBC's increasingly absurd broadcasts just another sign of panic caused by the bastards. The news had only penetrated his skull when his political fixer had staggered in, bleeding from his shoulder, and raving about massive aliens. And then he'd heard their broadcast…

His position as an elected MP was useless now, Alan knew. The British Government was on the run — no one had seen hide or hair of

Burley and his ineffectual Cabinet since the aliens had landed. Alan knew better than to assume that Burley could turn the situation around, which meant that it was every man for himself. The aliens, on the other hand, wielded real power. He could make an alliance with them and offer his services in exchange for protection, wealth and more power than he'd ever dreamed possible. Who knew what sort of rewards a race that could cross the gulfs between stars could offer their faithful servants?

He stopped dead as he saw the alien patrol turning towards him. Despite his belief that the aliens needed allies, it took all of his strength not to turn and flee. The massive brutes loomed over him, carrying weapons that seemed too large to be real. Alan had used shotguns and hunting rifles while staying at estates owned by his friends, but the alien weapons were very different. It struck him that the aliens had to be less socially developed than humanity — yet it hardly mattered. They'd crossed the gulf of space to reach Earth and impose their will upon humanity. It had taken them barely a day to crush most of humanity's defences.

Alan smiled and held up his hands, hoping that the aliens would understand the gesture. Their dark eyes showed no sign of human emotions; their faces seemed curiously immobile, almost as if they didn't have emotions at all. Or perhaps he was just looking in the wrong place. They might show their thoughts by how their hands moved when they spoke.

"I come in peace," he said. "Take me to your leader."

"Follow us," the lead alien grated. The voice didn't seem to come from its mouth, but from a small device hanging down below its oversized chin. Alan wasn't too surprised that they could speak English. They were clearly advanced enough to monitor human broadcasts and decipher human languages. "Do not attempt to escape."

The area surrounding Ten Downing Street and Buckingham Palace had been devastated. Alien machines were moving through the rubble, pushing it aside and exposing the hidden network of tunnels under Whitehall. A set of alien-designed buildings had already been erected in Hyde Park, allowing them to come and go freely, rather than trying to fit into human buildings. They'd have problems using human vehicles and aircraft, Alan told himself, and smiled. Even *he* appreciated that the aliens were on the end of a very long logistics chain. They'd be delighted if he could convince thousands of humans to serve their new overlords.

One of the aliens held up an oversized hand to stop him in his tracks, while a second waved what looked like a metal wand over his body. A security check, he realised, and allowed his mobile phone to

be confiscated without demur. He hadn't been able to get a signal to call anyone — the landlines seemed to be badly damaged, or perhaps the staff just hadn't reported in after the aliens had landed — and he made a mental note to suggest to the aliens that they restore mobile phone communications as soon as possible. It would go a long way towards allowing them to win hearts and minds.

The interior of the alien building was oddly disappointing. It seemed more like a giant tent than anything else, with dozens of aliens working on small consoles and barking orders — or at least he assumed they were orders — at their subordinates. A massive image of Britain was displayed against one wall, covered with red and green markers that appeared to surround most of the larger cities. For the first time, Alan allowed himself to doubt the wisdom of his course of action. The aliens seemed to have won the war in the first day. Perhaps they wouldn't need him…

His escorts opened a door in the side of the building and pushed him into an oversized office. It was easy to believe that it was a power office, like the rooms favoured by CEOs he knew, but perhaps it was just normal for the aliens. They would need more living space than humans — a large human office might be uncomfortably cramped for them. A single alien was half-crouching in front of a desk, tapping away at what had to be a computer terminal. He — Alan decided to assume that it was a male, at least until it was proven otherwise — wore a simple black uniform, decorated with golden writing. Assuming the aliens prized gold as much as humanity, he was looking at a senior officer. He stepped forward and did his best to place an interested expression on his face. Who knew how the aliens would react to a man offering to help them?

"I am *Ju'tro* Oheghizh," the alien said. Alan assumed that *Ju'tro* was a title of some kind — General, perhaps, or Leader? It was unlikely that the supreme commander of a force invading the entire planet would be based in Britain. "You wished to talk with me?"

"Yes, sir," Alan said. Perhaps the alien wouldn't understand human respect, but there was no reason to take chances. "I am a high official in the government of this country. I wish to offer you my services."

There was a long moment as the alien's unreadable eyes bored into Alan's face. "We know who you are," the alien said, finally. Alan's mind raced; he hadn't seen them communicating, but who knew what they might be able to do? They might have communications implants in their skulls. "You will assist us in bringing humanity into the State."

"Of course," Alan said, quickly. He allowed himself another smile. "I would be happy to serve."

* * *

"You know," Sergeant Singh observed, "I was rather hoping that it would be a nightmare."

Robin nodded in agreement. They'd found their way to a police station, hidden most of the weapons in what he hoped was a secure hiding place, and then gone to sleep in the station's dormitory. A handful of policemen with families had gone to their homes to check on their loved ones. No one had attempted to dissuade them. Robin had considered trying to slip out of the city and make it to his house — and his wife — but the aliens had blocked all of the roads out of London. He had kept trying the telephone, only to hear nothing, not even a dial tone.

He pulled himself out of the bunk and checked the shower. The station's internal water supply was still working, thankfully, as was the internal generator. Most of London's power had been lost overnight, although there was no way to know if the aliens had done it deliberately or if humans had simply shut the power stations down before they fell into alien hands. London had seemed uneasily quiet after the events of the invasion, but Robin had no illusions. It wouldn't be long before the veneer of society fell away and what remained of social order collapsed into anarchy. And without the police on the streets, it was likely to spread rapidly. God alone knew what would happen then.

"I managed to get some news from the BBC," one of the constables reported after he entered the briefing room. Had it only been two days ago when he'd been on patrol, back when the world had made sense? "They were claiming that negotiations are in progress and it was all a terrible mistake."

Robin snorted. "That was no mistake," he said, flatly. He couldn't see how a race that could cross light years could launch an attack on London by *accident*. The BBC had never impressed him as a policeman, if only because it tended to side against the police force whenever its honour, capability or competence was called into question. "The planet has been invaded and we're at war. God help us."

He scowled over at the darkened terminal. Normally, it would have been glowing with updates from across the city, as well as items of interest, lists of suspects and all the other information that the modern policeman needed on a daily basis. Now, it was dark, suggesting that the police communications network was still down. Each of the police stations would have been cut off from the others… he shook his head, bitterly. What were they supposed to do now? Report in to the aliens and see what they had in mind for police officers?

"I've got something," one of the other constables said. "I heard a voice…"

He fiddled with the radio again and the static faded away to a background hiss. "…Speaking for the Conquest Force," a voice — unmistakably human — said. "I am the sole surviving member of the British Government. We have been defeated. The Eridian Conquest Fleet has destroyed our defences. We can no longer offer resistance to their invasion force. I am therefore ordering all remaining military units to surrender at once to the nearest Eridian force. Their leaders have assured me that they will be treated well, in accordance with *their* Rules of Law."

Robin swore. "Who the hell is *that*?"

"That's Beresford," Sergeant Singh said. "I think he's sold out to the aliens!"

"We must accept the fact that human independence is over," Beresford continued. "They have informed me that humans who are willing to serve will receive good treatment and a chance to climb within their ranks. Humans who refuse to serve them will be treated as criminals and rebels against the new lawful authority on Earth. I have been charged with making the process of human assimilation into their society as smooth as possible. There is no other hope for the survival of humanity. The aliens rule the skies. Long-term resistance will only result in the deaths of millions of humans.

"Accordingly, I am ordering all civil servants and policemen to report for service at once," he continued. "Those who do not report will be treated as deserters and will face the consequences when they are caught. Our priority must be the reestablishment of law and order within Britain. Those who do not submit to their rule will be punished."

There was a long pause. "We have grown used to human despots concealing their true motives behind fancy language," he concluded. "The Eridians do not seem to share our attitudes. They wanted Earth; they took it. Their attitudes will not be swayed by pleas or protests. They believe that might makes right. Do not, for the sake of all humanity, seek to challenge them. They will respond with deadly force."

A moment passed, and then the message began to repeat itself. "Turn it off," Robin snarled, savagely. He couldn't believe his ears. There was no way to doubt that Beresford had sold out to Earth's new masters. They'd probably promised him wealth and power if he served them. "What the hell do we do now?"

One of the constables put their choice into words. "They seem to want us to work for them," he said. "If we do that…"

"Collaboration," someone else growled.

"If we work with them," the constable continued, "we would insulate the ordinary people — the people we swore to protect — from the aliens. If we refuse… we put our lives and those of our families in danger. We all know how the aliens react to challenges."

Robin nodded, bitterly. A group of louts — if he could be excused a moment of political incorrectness — had attacked an alien patrol with glass bottles and little else, apart from bad intentions. The aliens had opened fire and killed many of their attackers before the remainder fled for their lives. It hadn't been the only encounter between the aliens and humans who had tried to fight either. The aliens didn't seem to care that the humans were young, barely armed, and powerless… they'd seen a threat and dealt with it. They didn't have lawyers and politicians in uniform holding them back from handing out a good thrashing.

"There's another possibility," Sergeant Singh suggested. "We join up — and prepare ourselves to turn on the aliens if necessary. They might have *told* us that they've crushed all resistance, but we know that that might not be true."

"I won't push anyone into the decision," Robin said. He'd made up his mind. "If anyone wants to leave, they can do so now — without fear. I will go and see if I can shield humans from them…"

"Maybe," Sergeant Singh said. "Or perhaps they'll expect us to do as we're told. And we might be told to do something truly awful."

* * *

Fatima rubbed her eyes as she pulled herself from the depths of sleep. She'd just run out of energy — after seeing so many patients she'd lost count, she'd ended up finding a quiet corner and just collapsing into an uneasy sleep. Never in her worst nightmares had she imagined having to help so many people — and watch others die though lacking the supplies to save them. Maybe it had been a dream… she shook her head, cursing her own weakness. It had been no dream. They were still in the makeshift hospital and she could hear patients moaning in pain.

She pulled herself to her feet and headed towards the corridor. It was crammed with patients, lying on the floor; only the lucky ones had blankets to insulate themselves from the cold. The sight appalled her; the NHS hadn't been the best medical service in the world, but it wouldn't have allowed such conditions in a hospital. Now… now there was nothing they could do for their patients, but try to make them as comfortable as possible. They'd raided all the nearby chemists and supermarkets — and they were *still* short of supplies.

A hand fell on her shoulder and she jumped. “You all right, missy?”

It was a policeman, wearing what looked like riot-control gear. “I’m tired,” she said, bitterly. “What are you doing here?”

“It seems that they want us to take care of the hospitals,” the policeman said. He sounded as if he didn’t quite believe his own words — or the changes in the world since… had it really been only a day ago? “There’s fifty of us assigned here and over a hundred at the nearest hospital. Someone’s been helping them assign us, that’s for sure. Did you hear the broadcast?”

“I’ve been sleeping,” Fatima admitted. Her body ached and she was uncomfortably aware that she stank. The white jacket she wore had been stained by blood. Her supervisor would have been furious at her if she’d turned up to work looking as if she’d walked out of a slaughterhouse. “What happened?”

“One of our beloved MPs has sold out to the aliens,” the policeman explained. “I think we’re expected to bow and scrape before them now — or they’ll be offended. And it seems that their response to offense is to open fire.”

Fatima shivered. “Is there nothing we can do?”

“It seems that we’ve been beaten,” the policeman said. “Maybe there’ll be a chance to do something about it later, but for the moment we just have to keep our heads down and see what happens. Maybe the remains of the military can beat them off, or… something. Perhaps the Americans will fly a captured UFO up to the mothership and blow them up…”

He shook his head. “All we can do is wait and see,” he said. “The fighting seems to be at an end — and we lost. The country has been invaded. And God alone knows what is going to happen next.”

Chapter Ten

Near Salisbury Plain
United Kingdom, Day 2

"You know," Chris Drake said, "I never thought I would be pleased to see a redcap."

The Military Policeman smiled, a little weakly. "It's been one of those days," he agreed. "Name, rank and unit?"

Chris smiled. He'd allowed the Thames to push him out of London before climbing out and finding a convenient place to dry himself. There had been a small charity shop nearby where he'd picked up enough clothes to keep himself warm as he walked the long way around London and up towards Salisbury Plain. He'd been lucky enough to find a civilian Range Rover, which he'd borrowed to complete the rest of the journey, but he'd been forced to stay off the main roads. The aliens, according to the radio transmissions he'd picked up, *liked* roads. They would, he assumed, have shot him or captured him the moment they saw him.

He'd relaxed a little as he headed westwards, until he'd run into the military police unit. He wasn't the only soldier who'd been separated from his unit and forced to travel alone to the rendezvous point, although as far as he knew he was the only soldier who'd escaped the Battle of London. The others had been supposed to link up in a disused warehouse and consider either making it out by foot or carrying on the fight against the invaders — God alone knew what had happened to them. He'd trained beside them, fought beside them — and now he was alone. Unless he was very lucky, he'd be pushed into a new unit to make up the manpower shortfall.

"You were in *London*?" The MP said asked, clearly impressed. "We've got orders to forward all survivors from London to the RV point. It seems that some of our superiors will want to talk to you."

Chris hesitated. There *was* a defence line being constructed that should slow the aliens down — he doubted that a force with air supremacy could be stopped — and part of him wanted to join it, to get stuck into the aliens who had killed so many of his friends and comrades. The rest of him knew that it was his duty to brief his superiors, to tell them what had happened at London and to ensure that the Household Division's last stand went down in the history books. But would the people writing the history books be human — or alien?

"They're going to be waiting to hear from you," the MP said, a moment later. "I suggest you brief them quickly. They're going to hit

us soon."

Chris nodded and gunned the engine. He knew the area around Salisbury Plain fairly well — a legacy of the time spent boozing after exercises in the Live Firing Training Area — and it shook him to see so many deserted houses. The civilians would have been warned to leave the area as quickly as possible, whatever the aliens might have had to say about it. They probably wouldn't care if human civilians were caught in the crossfire. Everything they'd done suggested a certain lack of concern for human life. The sight of refugees heading north or south tore at his heart. Britain hadn't seen such deprivation since the Civil War — and that, by European standards of the time, had been remarkably civilised. He caught sight of a tank hidden under camouflage netting and waved to the man standing beside it, clearly planning an ambush. They should get in at least one good shot before the aliens started dropping killer crowbars from orbit.

Two miles further on, he ran into a second group of military policemen who ordered him to abandon the Range Rover and proceed on foot. The woodlands seemed crammed with human soldiers, including Royal Marines and RAF Regiment personnel, all forced together by circumstances. Chris had fought beside the Royal Marines in Afghanistan and while he thought — naturally — that the soldiers had the advantage, he had to admit that the Royal Marines were tough, professional fighters. The military policemen were sorting them out, sending some further away from Salisbury Plain while holding others to join the defence line. It *looked* as if someone was in command, thankfully. Perhaps everything he'd seen in London would be useful after all.

But the aliens controlled the high orbitals over Earth. They could bombard the planet into submission, or hammer any human military force foolish enough to show itself openly. How could an insurgency hope to win against such an enemy? God alone knew if they could do more than sting the enemy…

"Down here," a military policeman said. There was a hatch hidden in the woods, seemingly leading down to nowhere. Given how many other bunkers, bases and supply dumps were scattered around Salisbury Plain, it made sense to think that there was a government bunker hidden there too. "They'll meet you at the bottom."

Chris nodded and began to descend down the ladder.

* * *

"Are you decent, Prime Minister?"

Gabriel snorted at Butcher's mock-falsetto tone. He'd slept for

several hours and awoke feeling as if he hadn't slept very long at all, but his watch told a different story. Butcher — who had apparently been assigned as his permanent bodyguard — had pointed him at the shower and told him to take his time. Someone had brought in a spare set of clothes, allowing him to lose the suit and tie he'd worn during the mad rush from London. The military seemed to have maintained its sense of efficiency, he told himself, and wondered how long that would last.

"I think so," he said, finally. He hadn't been able to shave and his cheeks felt rough with stubble. "Have we been discovered?"

"I don't think so," Butcher said. "But there have apparently been developments. I'll leave it to the Brigadier to brief you."

They walked down the concrete corridor and into the conference room. Most of the operators he remembered from last night were missing, their stations shut down and marked for destruction. In fact, the entire bunker complex seemed emptier than he recalled — even though he could hear the sound of people talking in low voices down the corridor. He assumed that they hadn't been detected — they would have fled the bunker if they had even *suspected* that the aliens knew where they were — but it was clear that something had changed. The Brigadier, when he made his appearance a moment later followed by a young soldier, looked deeply worried.

"Prime Minister," he said. "I'm afraid that there have been developments."

Gabriel listened carefully as the story of the Battle of London came pouring out of the young soldier. Two companies of British soldiers had fought and held the aliens for nearly an hour, before the aliens finally pushed through by brute force. London itself had been damaged in the crossfire, with at least one alien transport crash-landing in Central London. The thought was impossible to grasp — it just wasn't supposed to happen in Britain. Even the suicide bombers who'd killed far too many civilians on 7/7 hadn't even dreamed of causing so much pain.

"It gets worse," the Brigadier added. "I'm afraid that the aliens have found themselves a Petain."

He tapped a console and the recorded radio message played out, twice. Gabriel found himself listening with growing anger as Alan Beresford — an MP who had been implicated in a dozen scandals, yet nothing quite seemed to stick — recited the alien message to the British population. God alone knew what the public would make of it. They'd be frightened, isolated from the rest of the world, unsure of their place… far too many would simply grasp the straw Beresford was offering them. And the aliens themselves…

If Beresford was to be believed, their social development had not

matched their technological development. But then, a case could be made that humanity's development hadn't matched its technology either. The aliens… they'd come, they'd seen and they'd conquered, with as little regard for the rights of mankind as Julius Caesar had shown to the barbarians he'd crushed beneath the heels of his legions. It was tempting to believe that Beresford was a liar — Gabriel wouldn't have believed that the sky was blue if Beresford had said it — but so far everything the aliens had done matched what he'd said. But then… if Nazi Germany had won World War Two, everyone would have been raised to believe that Nazism was right.

"My God," he said, finally. "What do we do about it?"

The Brigadier scowled. "The last reports have the aliens massing forces here, here and here," he said, tapping locations on the map. "I believe that they intend to advance westwards within the next few hours and scatter our forces before we can regroup and take the offensive. I'm afraid that we're going to have to put our emergency plan into operation before too long."

Gabriel nodded. "What do we have to do?"

"You're going to a secure location in the north — an old estate that belongs to a family that has been linked with the British Government for centuries," the Brigadier said. "It was always envisaged as the final resort — and so there haven't been any mentions of it on our computers or anywhere else. Butcher and his team will escort you there and then take care of you, once you've recorded a message for the civilians. You have to tell them that there's a government still out there fighting…"

"But won't that encourage them to fight themselves?" Gabriel asked. "Won't we just be prolonging the agony?"

"I wish I knew," the Brigadier admitted. "Back when I did a stint at Northwood, I saw some of the contingency plans and scenarios dreamed up by civil servants. They all tended to change depending upon the underlying assumptions, but I think we have to assume that the majority of the civilian population will not resist the invaders. But there's a fine line between not resisting and outright collaboration and… if they believe that there is a government left out there, fewer people will collaborate. I think that the aliens have to have limits on their manpower. Whatever their FTL drive, shipping millions of troops across interstellar distances cannot be cost-effective."

"And the fewer collaborators they have, the harder it will be for them to rule Earth," Gabriel said. The Brigadier nodded. "But what do they *want*?"

"If we take that traitorous bastard at his word, they think they have the right to rule everyone too weak to stand up to them," the Brigadier said. "Or maybe they have some other goal in being here

that they're keeping to themselves — perhaps because they fear we could spite them in some way. Overall… we don't know what they want.

"The good news is that we managed to make contact with two of our missile boats," he added. "The aliens hit our submarine bases pretty hard, but we had three of the four boats at sea and two of them have been appraised of the situation. Using them may be tricky with the aliens controlling space, yet we do feel that there are possibilities. We've also managed to pull most of the tactical nukes from their storage bunkers and I've given orders to conceal them…"

"They are not to be used without my express permission," Gabriel said, sharply. The thought of nuclear war on British soil was horrifying. "I want you to make that clear to your officers."

"They know to keep them in reserve," the Brigadier said, flatly. "Overall, most of our deployed submarines — the attack submarines as well — seem to have survived. They may be usable in the future, but for the moment we have no firm plans."

He stood up. "We'll make a stand when they come west and give them a bloody nose, then fall back to prepared positions," he concluded. "And then most of the lads will go underground and carry on the fight. The aliens have ordered all military and police personnel to surrender themselves — they've clearly started putting the police to work, but no one thinks they intend to make use of the soldiers! It seems that they're already establishing detention camps near the cities. Most of the lads would sooner die than go into one of them."

* * *

"People of Britain," Gabriel said, twenty minutes later. It didn't sound good. Normally, back in Ten Downing Street, he would have had a speechwriter, a make-up artist and a careful briefing on who was expected to be in the media crowd and what questions they might ask. He'd spent so much time preparing for speeches that it had often struck him that he'd done little else in his brief time as Prime Minister. And now… half the population would probably curse him as a man who'd fled, leaving them to face the aliens. "Our nation has been invaded."

He took a breath. "I won't lie to you," he continued. He'd wanted to be honest in his speeches, but the crowd of advisers had warned that too much blunt speaking could backfire. The public seemed to believe that politicians were always liars, yet they elected men who made them feel good about themselves — instead of telling them the truth. At least now he could go with his instincts. "The situation is

dire. Many of our cities have been invaded directly; others have lost power and water supplies. Anarchy is threatening to grip our streets.

"Many of you will be frightened. Many of you will wonder if we can resist the aliens, or even if we *should* resist the aliens. Others will seek to take advantage of the chaos for their own benefit. I know that many of you will be looking to safeguard your families and friends, rather than thinking about the welfare of the country. I cannot blame you for worrying about your own lives, or those of your friends and families. The entire country has suffered a devastating blow. Our world has been turned upside down.

"But Britain has a long and proud history of resisting tyranny. It was us who stood alone against Nazi Germany, though we were bombed and half-starved and suffered defeat after defeat. We played a full part in the containment of Communist Russia, preventing general war from engulfing Europe for the third time. We stood firm against Napoleon when he threatened to invade our shores. The situation is dire, but it is not hopeless. We can fight back against the latest invaders.

"The British Government has survived and it will carry on the fight as long as possible," he concluded. "I will not order you to resist — I want you to decide for yourselves. If you wish to stand up and fight for Britain, for the freedom of our island nation, join us in resisting the enemy. Take care of yourselves, plan carefully — and hit them as hard as you can. There will be many dark days ahead, days where we can assume nothing, but blood, toil, tears and sweat, but there will come a day when we live freely in our own land once again."

He tapped the switch, ending the recording. "Very good, Prime Minister," Linux said. "I'll have it online tonight, once this bunker has been evacuated. The entire world will hear your speech…"

Gabriel frowned. "But the aliens will try to wipe it from the internet," he pointed out. Their jamming had certainly prevented any attempt to reclaim the airwaves. "How can we stop them purging it before it reaches its intended audience?"

"Leave that to me," Linux said. "There are thousands of people on the internet who devised all kinds of programs to share files — despite the best that governments and big corporations could do to stop it. We'll get your message to the world — after that, it's all up to them."

"Thank you," Gabriel said. He wanted to ask what would happen to the young soldier, but the words wouldn't form in his mouth. How could he ask anyone to fight for Britain when he was going to run away and hide?

Butcher cleared his throat. "Prime Minister?" He said. "It's time to go."

“Understood,” Gabriel said. He hesitated for a moment, and then nodded. “Let’s go.”

The climb back up into the open air made him feel oddly claustrophobic. It was a relief when they finally reached the surface and emerged in the midst of a small group of armed soldiers. Butcher spoke to them briefly, and then led the way northwards through the woods. Gabriel could hear the sound of birds chirping in the distance, ignoring the presence of human soldiers in their habitats. Their lives would go on regardless of who ruled the planet. He looked up into the bright blue sky and shivered. There was something impossibly surreal about the whole scene.

“The scouts reported refugees gathering to the north,” Butcher said, as they reached a civilian car that had obviously been commandeered by the military. “We’ll try to give them a wide berth. The aliens don’t seem to care about civilian vehicles, but I think that will change once they realise that we’ve been using them to ship men around under their noses.”

Gabriel opened his mouth to ask why *they* were using a civilian car, before realising that there was no other choice. He couldn’t have made it to the north on foot. The SAS men were used to walking for miles in a single day, but *he’d* just slow them down. They had to rely on the car and hope that the aliens didn’t start blasting vehicles at random.

He glanced over towards the east. No plumes of smoke marred the sky, but he knew that the aliens were present — and planning their offensive. He wondered how many people still didn’t realise what had happened, or what was going on — there had to be entire communities that hadn’t had any contact with the aliens. No matter how advanced they were, he couldn’t see how they intended to occupy every last town and village on the planet. If he was in their shoes, how would *he* do it? Target America, Europe, Russia and China… and let the rest of the world collapse into chaos?

And how long could Gabriel accept his people suffering while he hid from their new masters?

Chapter Eleven

Long Stratton
United Kingdom, Day 2

For a moment, Alex was half-convinced that she'd been having a nightmare. She lay in a comfortable bed, so comfortable that she wanted to return to slumber. Instead, she opened her eyes and beheld an unfamiliar room. It reminded her of the room she'd shared with her boyfriend back when they'd gone on vacation together, right down to the sunlight streaming in through the window. The presence of her pistol where she'd left it within easy reach brought her back to reality. Her country had been invaded and it was her duty to report in to superior authority — or carry on the fight alone, if possible.

The scent of frying bacon from downstairs made her stomach rumble and she pulled herself out of bed. Smith had brought her back to the farm and convinced her to remain for a day or two, just to see what happened. Who knew — perhaps someone would succeed in finding a way to drive the invaders away from Earth. Alex, who knew that such things only happened in bad movies, was much less optimistic. The farmland surrounding her seemed too mundane to be touched by the aliens, but the fireworks in the sky told her that the world had changed. God alone knew what was going to happen next.

Smith's wife — who'd turned out to be called Jean — had loaned her a dress and a shirt that was only a size or two too big for her. Alex pulled it on anyway; her uniform had been growing increasingly rank and it would only attract attention when — if — she set out to contact higher authority. There was no way to know what the roads would be like, or how many people would be fleeing the cities for the countryside now that the world had turned upside down. The modern RAF had never designed contingency plans for regrouping after an invasion of the British mainland. It had never even been a serious possibility.

She went to the toilet, splashed water on her face, and headed down the stairs towards the kitchen. Jean was already hard at work, frying what looked like bacon, eggs and potatoes in a massive frying pan. It looked wonderfully unhealthy, just the kind of food she'd eaten back home, when she hadn't been worrying about her weight. Whatever else could be said about life in the military, it ensured that soldiers, sailors and airmen got plenty of exercise. There weren't many fat personnel until one reached the higher levels of military leadership.

"Take one of the plates and pass it over to me," Jean ordered.

“I’ve pulled you some fresh milk, straight from the cow. You’ll have to learn to milk her for herself if you live longer — it’s one of those experiences no one ever tells the city-folk until they come out here and stay with us.”

Alex took the milk with some trepidation. “Is it safe to drink?”

“Of course it is,” Jean said. “Of course, those bureaucrats think otherwise — and they do have a point, if the milkman isn’t very careful. But no one here wants to go down in history as the farm that got a few hundred people killed. If those aliens” — she pronounced the word with a snort, as if she didn’t quite believe it — “happen to kill all of those interfering meddlers who know nothing, plenty of people round here will raise a glass in their honour.”

Alex frowned, sipping the milk. “But isn’t that a bit disloyal…?”

Jean snorted, again. “You seem to think that the government is always a good thing,” she said. “Do you know how much red tape we have to jump through, every year? Government seems determined to bury us in red tape and endless paperwork. Dear God — there have been years where I’ve seriously considered just urging the man to walk away from the farm. No one seems to *want* us to do anything, but fill in forms. You can’t make a man a farmer by sending him to impractical courses run by people who aren’t farmers…”

She shook her head. “I won’t miss the government, young lady,” she added. “And I think that many people here will feel the same way.”

There was a hiss as she turned a pair of rashers over, and then piled them onto a plate with potatoes and eggs. “Eat up,” she said, cheerfully. “As far as anyone knows, you’re one of the city-folk who booked a holiday with us so you could experience life on a farm. You’re going to have a busy day ahead of you.”

Alex ate slowly, savouring the natural taste of the bacon and fresh eggs. She didn’t mind working on the farm — for all she knew, money was worthless right now — but she knew that she couldn’t stay for long. The farm would probably soon be visited by the aliens, who’d want food for themselves — if they could eat human crops. Alex was fairly sure that they’d like Earth as a new home; they wouldn’t have bothered to invade if Earth was useless to them. Unless they were just nasty bastards, of course — and that was quite possible. They certainly hadn’t bothered to demand surrender before they started shooting.

She tossed the thought around her head as she ate, trying to guess what the aliens would do next. There was no way to know. The last messages she’d seen on the internet reported that the aliens were securing London, Manchester, Birmingham and a number of other cities. There had been clashes between their forces and human mobs,

clashes that had gone very badly for the humans. Somehow, Alex wasn't surprised. The aliens seemed to prefer brute force to anything more subtle and nothing stamped one's authority on a situation like brute force — provided that there was enough brute force, of course. But the aliens controlled space. They could lose control of large parts of Earth and still win the war. Hell, for all she knew, they were deliberately provoking humans to attack them so they could wipe out potential resistance fighters before they could get organised.

"Ann and Sue dropped in this morning," Jean said, as Alex was chasing the last of the egg around her place with a slice of bread. "They left their home yesterday and camped out before making the rest of the drive here. Ann had to pay for petrol the old-fashioned war, damn it. Maybe the aliens can do something about the price of fuel while they're at it."

Alex frowned. The old-fashioned way? It took her a moment to realise that Ann had probably had to go down on the petrol station's owner to get fuel for her car. The thought was sickening, but it was probably only a taste of the future. If the aliens had blocked off supplies of fuel as well as food, the civilian population would lose its mobility very quickly — once the rest of the fuel ran out. The RAF had had stockpiles of aviation fuel for its aircraft, but the aliens might have destroyed it. And that would leave what remained of the RAF permanently grounded.

"Maybe they can," she agreed. "What did they say about the roads?"

"The aliens have been broadcasting orders for people to stay off the main roads," Jean said. "Speaking of which" — she clicked the radio and music started to echo out — "listen to this. Someone will start speaking in a moment…"

"People of Britain, my name is Alan Beresford and I am the sole remaining member of the British Government…"

Alex listened in disbelief as the message played out and then started to repeat. She knew of Alan Beresford by reputation — no military officer could afford to be a virgin where politics were concerned — and she knew that he wasn't well-regarded, but outright treachery? The message played again and again, before music started to fill the airwaves once again. Maybe Alan Beresford believed that there was no way to resist the aliens, or maybe he'd just seen a chance for advancement and taken it. There was no way to know for sure.

"That bastard," she said, finally. "He's sold us out to them!"

"So it would seem," Jean agreed. She picked up Alex's plate and stuck it in the sink. "Go wash your hands and then report to the man outside. He'll keep you busy until lunchtime."

Alex nodded and obeyed. The next three hours were an

education. She'd never realised how much had to be done each day on a farm, from mucking out the pigs — who eyed her with disconcerting eyes — to rubbing down the horses. Smith explained that they also made money by renting out their horses to a nearby riding school, which had ties to a college for young ladies that specialised in turning their brains into mush. Alex had never thought much about horses, but it seemed that the young girls honestly had no idea how to treat them when they finally got to ride on their backs. Some of the horses were very docile, even with young and inexperienced riders; others seemed nasty, including a big black horse that eyed her balefully.

"Stalin there won't allow himself to be ridden," Smith commented. Somehow, Alex found it difficult to turn her back on the horse. Stalin — a play on words, she realised after a moment — seemed to be waiting for a moment to kick her or trample her into the ground. "Someone treated him very badly, poor thing, and he's been good for nothing apart from breeding ever since. A couple of people have tried to ride him and always come off worst."

"I'm surprised he wasn't put down," Alex said. Horses… but then, jet aircraft could be temperamental too. Too many missions had had to be aborted because multimillion pounds worth of equipment had failed at the wrong time. "Isn't he a danger to everyone?"

"No kids around here," Smith said, "and the wife and I know better than to relax around him."

He shrugged. "After lunch, do you want to go see old Nathan Archer? He was saying that there's something he wants you to see. The Parish Council meeting last night rather impressed him."

Alex looked at him, sideways. "*Should* I go?"

Smith snorted. "Nathan's a harmless old man," he said. "He used to run a large farm, but much of it got sold off in the seventies, leaving him with just a couple of fields. His wife died years ago and his kids never visit. I think he'd be glad of the company."

"I'll go then," Alex decided. "Are we going to have lunch now?"

"Hungry?" Smith asked. He laughed. "I hear the same from everyone who stays here — and no, it isn't lunchtime yet. We've barely begun to work."

He was still chuckling as they walked over to the field. "But you're not doing too badly, not like some of the visitors," he added. "We'll make a farmer out of you yet."

* * *

Nathan Archer's farmhouse looked older than Smith's farmhouse, although Alex wasn't entirely sure why she had that impression. It was

a long low building, with a large door and roses growing up the side of the house. Most of the windows looked too small for their positions, almost like portholes in the side of a ship. A pair of heavy axes had been nailed above the doors, reminding her of some of the decorations she'd seen in Afghanistan. They looked securely fashioned, but she nipped under them as quickly as possible. She tapped on the door and waited. It was several minutes before Archer opened the door and peered out at her.

"Welcome to my home," he said. His accent was more rustic than Smith's accent, suggesting that he didn't spend much time watching the television. "Did you come alone?"

Alex tensed at the question, despite the pistol concealed within her jacket. "Yes," she said, finally. "I only told Farmer Smith where I was going…"

"Smith can keep a secret," Archer said. He picked up a stick, closed the door and hobbled out around the house. Alex heard the sound of dogs barking as they rounded the house and came up to a small fence marking out the rear garden. A small army of dogs were yapping away, some large enough to make her glad that she was carrying the pistol. She didn't recognise half of the breeds, but then she'd never been a dog fancier. Cats were far less trouble to keep. "Down boys, now!"

Alex watched in some amazement as the dogs sat down, their tongues lolling out of their mouths as if they were exhausted. "I used to be able to take them for walks every day," Archer explained, "but I can't do that now and I can't bear to give them away. I just have to let them have the run of the garden and hope that they don't make too much of a mess."

He led her over towards a barn, standing alone in the middle of a field. "I was a young farmer of nineteen when the war started," he said. Alex took a sharp look at him, realising that he was talking about the Second World War — just like the person she'd met at the Parish Council. That would make him over ninety years old, surely. "I volunteered for service at once, only to be told that I was in an essential occupation. The young men of the parish called me coward as they marched away and I bloodied my fists on many of their faces."

His mouth opened in a crooked smile. "We were all so much more *vital* back then," he added. "None of this self-obsessed whining of the modern generation — we worked, we knew where we stood, we knew that we were responsible for ourselves. And there was no embarrassment over fighting to defend our country from the Hun. A quarter of the map was coloured pink and we loved it. All those whiners who say we shouldn't have had an empire never understood what it was like to have pride. Now, no one has any loyalty to their

country.

"But I'd registered when I'd volunteered and they found a job for me," he said. "Everyone knew that it was just a matter of time before that little German Corporal led his dragoons over to England. They started preparing for war — for a war that would still continue even if the Germans occupied London and banished the King to Canada. And farmers like me were given a secret role to play when the Germans had defeated the army and believed themselves secure."

They reached the barn. Archer pulled an old set of keys out of his pocket and opened the padlock, pushing the doors open wide enough to allow light to stream into the confined spaces. It was empty, the floor covered with decaying straw and pieces of animal waste. Alex wrinkled her nose at the smell, before Archer pushed her to one side and started digging through the piles of straw. It struck her that something was concealed *under* the barn, something that might have lain in hiding for a very long time…

"They told us to keep it safe," Archer said. There was a click as he found a hidden board of wood in the floor and pulled it up. A few moments of struggling revealed a hatch neatly hidden, one that he had problems lifting alone. Alex walked over and helped him to pull the hatch all the way up, revealing a darkened space under the barn. Archer pulled out a small electric torch and shone it down into the darkness, revealing a number of bundles that looked as if they hadn't been touched for years. "First there was the Nazis, and then there were the Communists — oh yes, we were worried about them. I always believed that they would come and recover the dump's contents, but the government never bothered to come pick it up."

Alex stared at him, and then back down into the chamber. "How long has this been here?"

"Some of it has been here since 1940," Archer said, with some pride. "We had some changed during 1944 when we got new equipment from America — and some more got changed during the 1950s. And then the officials stopped visiting and we just kept on taking care of it. And it has never been touched."

"My God," Alex said. Now that he'd reminded her, she recalled a case where one such dump had been discovered fifty-odd years after the war. The farmer who had been charged with taking care of it, knowing that he was growing older, had contacted the police, who'd reported it to the army. Only in Britain could an entire repository of weapons and explosives meant for an underground resistance have been forgotten through bureaucratic oversight. But of course they wouldn't have wanted records. They would have led the Germans — who had disarmed their subject peoples as a matter of course — right to the cache. "What… what are you going to do with it?"

Archer let the hatch fall back down. “I’m really too old to feel that I have much to lose,” he said. “The country has been invaded, young lady, and I took an oath to carry on the fight even if the government has been destroyed or forced to surrender. I intend to fight and I expect that you will fight with me against the bastards.”

There was no give in his voice. Alex nodded, slowly. He was right; there was little hope of linking up with what remained of her unit, but she could carry on the fight. Maybe they were doomed, maybe the aliens could defeat them with ease… she shook her head. They had to fight.

It was the only hope of freedom.

“Very well,” she said. “How many others know about this?”

“Not many,” Archer said, “but enough to start a small army. And then we can teach them that humans don’t come cheap!”

Chapter Twelve

Near Salisbury Plain
United Kingdom, Day 2

"Coming through clear as day, sir," the technician reported. "It seems that the Yanks were right and the bastards can't track microburst transmissions."

Brigadier Gavin Lightbridge-Stewart nodded. They hadn't been able to pull much information from the ongoing war in the United States, but the Americans had apparently had some success with stealth aircraft and UAVs. The SAS had been loaned a Shadow Hawk UAV by the CIA to support British troops operating in the Middle East and it had survived the bombardment of British bases across the mainland. It was currently orbiting high over Basingstoke, watching the alien land forces heading west, and relaying what it saw to the mobile command post.

A small alien detachment had apparently been ordered to lay siege to Reading, with alien troops taking up positions on the roads and discouraging civilians from escaping by firing over their heads. Despite that, a vast number of refugees had managed to leave the cities and towns and were currently scattered all over the area, often causing confusion and delays for the British military. The aliens seemed to have fewer problems, if only because their standard response to anyone trying to get in their way was to open fire. Their hover-tanks — or so the young soldiers on the front lines had dubbed them — seemed to combine the armour of a Challenger tank with the speed and agility of a far lighter vehicle. It hadn't escaped Gavin's sense of irony that they'd overrun Woking with terrifying speed. If their infantry hadn't been slower than their tankers, they might well have crushed the remaining British defences before they'd had time to regroup.

Part of his mind mulled over what the alien technology and observed capabilities seemed to suggest about their motives. They'd come as an army of occupation and they'd obviously come loaded for bear, but they seemed to lack the flexibility that every Western army tried to drill into its personnel. They seemed to have poor coordination between the armour and infantry, a problem that had caused many defeats in human history. In fact, given a level playing field — with no orbiting starships ready to drop rocks on their heads — he was sure that the 1st Armoured Division would have hammered the aliens. Their coordination between their aircraft, their ground forces and their spacecraft was surprisingly limited. It all

suggested book-learning, rather than actual experience — and yet they were clearly experienced at taking control of their conquests. The speed with which they'd found collaborators and pressed them into service proved that beyond all doubt. It was all very odd.

But I bet the armies of Oliver Cromwell or King Charles would have had some problems understanding what we do as a matter of course, he thought, wryly. Maybe the logistics of an interstellar power worked differently to those on Earth. There were seven *billion* humans on the planet, but for all he knew the aliens had seven billion soldiers and the ability to deploy them to Earth. He rather hoped not, yet it remained a possibility.

"Contact the advance parties," he ordered. At least they'd been able to set up some limited signalling capabilities. The aliens struck the source of any transmission very quickly, but his men had set up a series of expendable transmitters. "Tell them that they are cleared to engage at will."

* * *

"I got the signal, boss," one of the soldiers outside the Challenger II tank said. "The enemy are on their way."

"Understood," the Commander said. He'd never anticipated fighting an all-out war in the heart of the English countryside, but he was damned if he and his tank were to be found wanting when the shit hit the fan. "You lot had better scarper. We'll be along presently."

His tank and a handful of others had been involved in the exercises when the aliens had announced their presence by bombarding the garrisons around Salisbury Plain. Shocked and horrified, he'd rallied his men and reported in to the remaining military command structure and had been ordered to take up a position watching the A342. They'd used their remaining fuel getting there — it had been a nightmarish journey — but they'd made it. He now scanned the horizon waiting for the first alien tanks to come into view. They seemed to like human roads.

Absently, he patted the side of his Challenger. Pound for pound, the Challenger had a fair claim to being one of the best Main Battle Tanks in the world — when tested, during the invasion of Iraq, they'd performed brilliantly. As they were unable to retreat, he'd had his position heavily camouflaged and the tank's engine switched off, leaving them — hopefully — undetectable. If they were wrong — if they'd been tracked during the night — they'd probably die before they knew what had hit them.

Suddenly, much faster than he'd expected, he saw the first alien

tank heading up the motorway. He studied it with considerable interest, noting that it didn't seem to have been designed to face a modern environment. Their armour hadn't been much better than anything in the human arsenal, according to the reports from London, and it didn't look as if they'd designed it to deflect incoming fire. Maybe they only ever faced handguns, he considered, or perhaps they rarely had to go one-on-one with enemy tankers. Or maybe… he shook his head. There was no time for speculation.

"Take aim," he ordered, quietly. They'd get one shot, maybe two, and then they'd have to run for it. Their escorts had left a few surprises down below for the alien infantry when they finally came into view, but they wouldn't be able to survive rocks dropped from orbit. "On my command, fire and then switch to the next target."

"Understood, boss," the gunner said. The tank's heavy main gun rotated as it locked onto its target. "Ready when you are…"

"Fire," the Commander barked. The Challenger shook as it fired a single shell towards the enemy tank. "Reload and…"

The enemy tank went up in a colossal fireball. "Good shot," the Commander said, sharply. "Take aim… fire!"

A second enemy tank died, followed rapidly by a third. The fourth enemy tank returned fire, hurling a shell that went safely over their heads and came down somewhere in the distance. They ignored the chance to take out a fourth enemy target and climbed out of their vehicle, running for dear life. Another explosion shook the world around them as the enemy tank zeroed in on its target. The Commander felt a moment of contempt. He understood the rationale behind firing back as quickly as possible, but a *human* force wouldn't have missed so many times. The aliens were out of practice…

He heard a whistling and then the world seemed to explode behind him, the force of the blast picking him up and hurling him into the ground at terrifying speed. His last thought was the brief hope that some of his crew might have escaped…

* * *

"Get moving, you idiots," *Tra'tro* The'Stig shouted. The thrice-damned humans had shot up one of the infantry's personnel carriers and instead of disembarking and taking the fight to their foes, the infantry unit inside was cowering. They'd never been under fire before, even in the exercises, but that was no excuse. "Get out before they hit you again!"

He cursed the humans again as the infantry unit finally started to disembark, half of them forgetting their training and looking as if they

wanted to retreat at once. The humans had shown a positive *gift* for preparing the ground, with nasty traps and snipers scattered everywhere. If one of those human snipers happened to see a few dozen infantry without enough protection, he could wreak havoc without fear of retaliation.

"Get moving," he yelled, again, pointing them towards the small cluster of large human buildings on the outskirts of a small town. The humans had hidden a small team there and if they moved quickly, they might manage to catch and kill the vermin before they escaped. Small human teams had hit the advancing force, inflicted some kills and then broken off, obviously trying to bleed the assault units without risking themselves unduly. "Kill the *Karna*-spawned devils before they kill you!"

A streak of lights fell to the ground some distance from their position, followed rapidly by a series of explosions that shook the world around him. The humans had made a stand — but in making a stand, they'd revealed their own location. At least they had no means to avoid bombardment from orbit, or the assault unit might have been chewed to ribbons before it finally broke through the human defences.

He led the charge at the human building, relying on speed to protect him from any human fire. Some of the infantry unit followed him, holding their own weapons at the ready, while others seemed stuck and unwilling to proceed further. The'Stig cursed their cowardice in the face of the humans, even as he tried to restrain some of the others from charging onwards. One of them ran through a doorway that seemed too large for mere humans, detonating a trap hidden within the building. His body was flung backwards and he landed on the ground, torn to bloody ribbons.

"You can't trust anything human," he snarled, angrily. A human vehicle seemed to be heading away from them, probably carrying the human soldiers who had stung his people so badly. He pointed his weapon at the vehicle and fired off a long stream of bullets, watching as they slashed through the human vehicle and killed its passengers. "Keep an eye on where you're walking — and don't relax, ever!"

The fighting seemed to be slacking off, but he knew that it was far from the end. They hadn't beaten the humans at all, not really — they'd fallen back to new positions they'd prepared for the next engagement. He wanted to know what was happening with the other assault units, but there was no way to know — it wasn't as if the Command Triad was going to bother to brief an ordinary infantry soldier. Rumour, however, suggested that there was fighting going on all over Earth. At least the humans would burn through their stockpiles of advanced weapons sooner rather than later. But of course they'd know that themselves…

He wanted to relax, but he didn't dare, not when so many units had been mangled together. It crossed his mind that he had probably shown that he deserved promotion — not that anyone would have noticed. The commanders who should have been watching their troops for potential officers were either at the rear or had gotten themselves killed heroically. He wondered, absently, if the humans had the same problem. Maybe they weren't so alien after all.

* * *

"Dirty murdering bastards," Corporal Tommy O'Neill muttered to himself. From his vantage point, he could watch helplessly as an alien patrol stumbled over a group of human refugees — and murdered them in cold blood. The humans hadn't even tried to fight, but it hadn't mattered. They'd been shot down and their bodies left abandoned on the side of the road. "Dirty fucking filthy murdering bastards."

He hadn't known that the refugees were there either, until two of them had started to run. No doubt they'd thought that they were well-hidden, unaware that the war was about to break right over their hiding place. He cursed his own oversight as he prepared himself for the coming engagement, promising to make the aliens pay for what they'd done. Civilians tended to shy away from soldiers, at least in his experience, but it was his duty to protect them. And if he couldn't protect them, he would at least avenge them.

It had taken several hours to lay the trap and it looked perfect, at least unless the aliens decided to start shooting human vehicles up at random. But even aliens from outer space had to have logistic needs; the briefing they'd received on the battle in London and other brief engagements between human and alien forces suggested that there was nothing magical about their weapons. They shot projectiles, just like human guns. Some of the troopers had wondered why the aliens — who could clearly cross space with ease — would limit themselves, but Tommy suspected that he knew the answer. Their weapons would be far simpler than directed energy ray guns right out of science-fiction. He smiled, feeling a moment of kinship with the aliens before it faded away. No doubt they'd had 'wonder-weapons' devised by boffins and tested in laboratories that hadn't worked anything like so well in the field too.

He reached for the detonator as the aliens passed the single abandoned vehicle. Gambling that they wouldn't know how to inspect the human-designed car, he'd stuffed it with explosives and laid a cord to the detonator, which he'd placed near his vantage point. Uncapping

the safety, he waited until one of the alien tanks was right next to the car and jammed down on the button. The results surprised even him. A colossal explosion flipped the enemy tank right over and literally vaporised most of the alien infantry. The remainder looked stunned and disorientated. Tommy allowed himself a tight smile and picked up his rifle. A new alien patrol was advancing towards their stricken comrades, watching carefully for any more traps. Tommy took aim and opened fire. The lead alien staggered backwards, inhuman blood flowing from its forehead, while the remainder opened fire in Tommy's general direction.

Poor shooting, he thought, as he moved to the next target. The aliens seemed to be learning quickly, although they seemed oddly reluctant to take cover. It took Tommy a moment to realise that they were scared of other booby traps, which was a crying shame — he hadn't had time to set up any more. He fired a final shot and started to crawl backwards. He had already marked out an escape route back to the RV point and he intended to be gone before the aliens gave chase. And if they didn't… well, that was good too.

* * *

"Go."

Captain Danny Jackson knew that he was lucky to be alive. He and his wingman had been on exercises with the British Army when their base at Middle Wallop had been destroyed by the aliens. As far as he knew, the two Apache helicopters they were flying were the last in Britain — perhaps the last in the world. There had been some Apache helicopters in Afghanistan — although never enough — but the aliens had probably clobbered them too. Danny couldn't do anything for his mates who were either dead or trying to fight their way out of a country that was probably swinging back under Taliban control, yet he *could* try to avenge them.

The two Apaches had been flown under cover of darkness to a location where they'd been hidden under camouflage netting, awaiting their chance to take the offensive. It seemed that they were about to get their chance; the aliens were shipping in more ground forces as they attempted to push their occupied zone further to the west. They were also shipping in armour — the direct feed from the orbiting UAV reported that there were at least fifty hover-tanks heading west — but the pilots had been given clear orders. Their principle targets were the alien troop carriers. If they were really lucky, they would kill a great many aliens who hadn't realised that the safety offered by their vehicles was really nothing more than an

illusion.

He took control of his aircraft and pulled her into the sky. There were no illusions about their chances of surviving the battle, but they were going to be operating right on top of the enemy forces. Surely, the aliens wouldn't call in orbital strikes that would be dangerously close to their own forces. Or perhaps they would. Humans had done all kinds of horrible things to other humans in their long history and why shouldn't the aliens do the same? What cause did humanity have to complain?

Because they're not human, he thought, wryly. *And because we didn't pick a fight with them*.

They flew low and fast, only coming up above the treetops when the alien troops came into view. Danny didn't give them any time to recover from their surprise; he took the Apache in a firing run right over the alien position, allowing his gunner to unleash hell on the aliens. There was no time to aim properly, but it hardly mattered — the only targets on the ground were hostile. Hellfire missiles slammed into alien troop carriers, while the chain gun raked down entire columns of alien soldiers. He yanked the helicopter upwards as an alien-launched missile lanced by them with bare meters to spare. Part of his mind noted that the aliens hadn't keyed their missiles for proximity detonation, an odd oversight. Human missiles were capable of detonating close to their targets and taking them out with shrapnel.

An alien helicopter came into view, looking rather like a larger version of the Apache. It opened fire on the two British craft, launching a spread of missiles towards them. Danny retaliated by launching a Sidewinder — the only one they had — and deploying flares in the hope of decoying the alien missiles. The alien missiles were fooled long enough for him to take them low and fast away from the ambush sight, hopefully heading for a place where they could set down. They might not be able to rearm and resume the attack — if there were any more Hellfire missiles in Britain, they were probably misplaced — but they might escape with their lives…

He cursed as his threat receiver lit up. An alien missile crew had fired a missile from directly below them and it was climbing right up their tailpipe. There was no time to escape; the alien missile struck the Apache's armour and blasted through into the compartment beyond. And the world went away in a blast of red-hot fire.

Chapter Thirteen

London/Near Salisbury Plain
United Kingdom, Day 2

"What in the name of the seven hells is happening?"

Ju'tro Oheghizh stared down at his updating display. The damned humans simply didn't know when they were beaten. Any sensible race would have sought to come to terms with its new masters by now, but the humans kept fighting — even threatening to kill their fellows who *did* have a modicum of sense in their heads. The advancing Land Force spearheads, convinced that they were mopping up the remains of the human military force, were being ambushed and forced back with chilling regularity. And the humans didn't even stick around long enough for his starships to pound their positions into dust.

"They don't have many resources left to throw at us," *J'tra* Mak'kat pointed out. He'd served with Oheghizh in previous campaigns and didn't bother to mince his words. The State didn't approve of officers being too familiar with their subordinates, but Oheghizh found it hard to care. "They're burning up what they have left rather than abandon it. And many of our troopers haven't been in combat before. They're making mistakes through simple unfamiliarity with the alien landscape."

Oheghizh couldn't disagree. In hindsight, it was clear that the humans — who hadn't started uniting themselves, unlike almost every other race in their stage of development — had plenty of experience fighting each other. The sociologists were still trying to discover exactly *why* the humans hadn't advanced into space, but it was clear that space-based forces hadn't played a significant role in their internal struggling. They'd have had a much better appreciation of how badly they were outmatched if they had, he told himself, although it was a case of not being grateful enough for what they had. A space-faring race would have been a far tougher morsel to digest.

"Order our forces to take extra care," he said, slowly. "And pass me the figures on their advanced weapons. Let me see what they have left."

The planners were right about one thing, he thought, as he studied the figures and compared them to their projections. It was clear that the humans *were* running out of advanced weaponry. Their tanks were holding their ground rather than falling back — as their own tactical doctrine ordered — and the advancing spearheads were reporting fewer and fewer contacts with human armour. The aircraft backing up the ground forces, after a handful of embarrassing losses,

reported that the humans had been reduced to deploying portable antiaircraft weapons rather than the sophisticated weapons they'd deployed in the opening hours of the invasion. And soon enough they'd run out of those too.

He watched through a set of advancing sensors as yet another human habitation was carefully explored. The humans had a whole series of unpleasant surprises for the troopers that first entered their dwellings — and a nasty sense of humour. He didn't want to think about the hundreds of injured or dead troopers that would have to be reported to the Command Triad. They would look down from high overhead, see the amount of casualties he'd suffered taking a relatively small area, and draw unpleasant comparisons with the Land Forces in the region the humans called the Middle East. It was hardly *his* fault that the terrain in the desert was far better suited for land warfare — and that the humans there seemed to have no idea of how to fight properly.

It could be worse, he told himself, dryly. The Chinese humans, after what looked like a successful opening strike to the invasion, had fired nuclear rockets at their own cities to destroy as many Land Force units as possible. Most of their primitive missiles had been knocked down by point defence units, but a handful had got through the network — and several more tactical nuclear weapons had been deployed by enemy ground forces. They didn't seem to care about the suffering they were inflicting on their own people, or the fact that they just couldn't win. At least the humans in Europe and America seemed smart enough to refrain from using nuclear weapons. The Conquest Fleet had gone to considerable trouble to decapitate the enemy command and control systems to prevent one or all of them authorising a nuclear strike.

Or they could be waiting for us to get into position, he thought, grimly. *Who knows what these humans will do*?

* * *

Yunt Ra'Sha watched in astonishment as humans fled their habitations, swallowing down the urge to hurry them on their way with a few rounds from his cannon. They'd been told to try to avoid engaging humans who weren't part of their military, but how was a lowly *Yunt* meant to tell the difference? Some of the smaller humans were clearly younglings, yet they seemed willing to throw rocks at the invasion force — and their seniors had all kinds of nasty surprises up their sleeves. His unit was still reeling after the death of their commander — killed by a human who'd driven a vehicle right into his

position. They'd killed the human, but that hadn't brought their commander back.

"Ugly creatures," one of his fellows muttered. It was true. The humans seemed to half-run, half-walk wherever they went… and they were covered in fur! At least they had the decency to wear clothing rather than show off their strange bodies, moving in ways that no civilised race could ever duplicate. "We should just kill them all and leave their bodies piled up high."

"Better not let Ha'She hear you say that," Ra'Sha said. Orders were orders — and the lowly sluggers who did most of the work weren't allowed to question their orders. "He thinks he's officer material, the fool. Just because his father has a medium-ranked position in an industrial combine he thinks he walks on water. Maybe the humans will kill him and that will be an end to it."

He braced himself as they advanced on the first human dwelling, a two-story house surrounded by an oddly-shaped garden. The houses they built were too small for him to feel comfortable, even the rooms that were large enough to house a fully-grown trooper. They just made him feel claustrophobic, even restrained — while the damned humans had complete freedom of action. The beasts could nip down corridors that were too thin for him and set up their next ambushes by the time they finally reached their lair. And then they'd just keep falling back, and back…

They'll run out of country soon, he told himself firmly, trying not to think about some of the injuries he'd seen on the other wounded. The humans seemed to prefer to wound rather than kill, although some of the wounds he'd seen would probably have killed a grown human. But then, they didn't have any experience with other races. They were probably still thinking in terms of killing their fellows, rather than bigger tougher aliens with excellent medical technology. He snorted at his own thoughts as he slipped up to the human house and peered through the glass window. If he started thinking so deeply, he'd probably qualify for officer material himself. Not that there was any hope of promotion, of course. The officers looked after their own first and foremost, with newcomers only accepted if they were a cut above the rest. And all *he* wanted was to survive the war and return home in time for mating season.

The interior of the human habitation looked empty, but he threw an explosive pack inside, just in case. It exploded with a satisfying flash and he leapt inside, holding his weapon at the ready as he scanned for threats. There was nothing, apart from piles of smashed furniture and a handful of fires. He ignored the heat and checked the rest of the house, pushing his way up tiny staircases that creaked alarmingly under his weight, and allowed himself a moment of relief

when he found nothing. The remainder of the patrol inched outside and waited for him. There was still the rest of the human village…

They checked two more houses before coming up on what looked like a human shop. Small piles of canned food lay everywhere, suggesting that the population had made a hasty departure. He caught sight of a half-opened packet of meat and had to resist the urge to taste it. The scientists swore blind that there was nothing on Earth that could kill them — at least they could eat everything the humans could eat — but it might have caused him to fall sick. And the penalties for rendering oneself unfit for combat were severe…

"Look," May'tha said, pointing to a large white container. It was smaller than the smallest member of the patrol, but it was clearly large enough to hold an adult human — maybe two, if they were very friendly. Adult Eridian didn't like being crammed so close together, yet the humans seemed to enjoy it — at least if the sociologists' interpretation of some of their videos was accurate. Or maybe they were nothing more than the human version of sexual movies. He'd enjoyed watching many of them when his childhood scales had started to fall off, revealing the adult skin below. "Do you think one of them could be hiding there?"

Ra'Sha reached for the handle, lifting his weapon into firing position. The reports from some of the other units had claimed that the humans were very good at concealing themselves — aided by the fact that they were smaller than the average Eridian. It was quite possible that one of their soldiers was hiding inside, waiting for the right moment to come out of hiding and attack them from the rear. He caught hold of the handle, pulled it open…

…And the world went away in a wash of fire.

* * *

"Well, damn me," Chris Drake muttered to himself, from where he'd been watching events. "I wasn't sure if that was going to work."

The aliens seemed to be learning — and they were moving faster as they realised that the British defenders were running out of tanks and antiaircraft weapons. They didn't seem to be learning as quickly as British and American forces had done in Afghanistan — indeed, there was still an oddly-robotic aspect to their performance — but they were definitely learning. He smiled at the fire in the distance before he started to crawl backwards. That alien patrol would never have a chance to report its findings to superior authority. The aliens seemed to be tougher than humans, but he doubted that any of them had survived the explosion. He'd gone to some trouble to ensure that

the blast would be as nasty as possible.

There were no more aliens in the town, as far as he knew, but he kept to the shadows as he ran westwards. The RV point wasn't far away, yet there was no way to know how long it would be before they pulled out, leaving anyone who hadn't made it in time to get out on their own. If the aliens pushed forward faster than expected, they'd have to leave, just to preserve what was left of Britain's fighting men. Upwards of five thousand men had fought on the defensive line. God alone knew how many had survived the experience.

He saw the flash of light and hurled himself to the ground as the world seemed to come apart around him. The aliens weren't taking any more chances with the town, even though they'd chased out the sole human defender. When he pulled himself to his feet and peered back to the east, most of the town had been blasted into smoking ruin. Any remaining surprises — he didn't think that there were any, but they'd been operating on a strict need-to-know policy — would have been destroyed. The aliens would make one sweep through the wreckage and then continue heading west. Any humans caught up in their advance would be lucky to escape with their lives.

Shaking his head, he started to walk west. They'd be waiting for him, he told himself, and if not he could probably make his own way to one of the dumps. And then he would carry on his part of the war. He wondered, just for a second, how the PM and Prince Harry — no, *King* Harry — were coping, before he pushed the thought aside. They'd all have to learn to cope in the forthcoming days.

* * *

"They broke though the final defence line, sir," Major Foster reported. The tiny command post had been carefully hidden, but his deputy's command post had been equally well-hidden — and the aliens had dropped a missile on their heads. "Colonel Bannerman is requesting permission to start Exodus."

Brigadier Gavin Lightbridge-Stewart hesitated. His instincts told him to keep fighting, to keep bleeding the aliens — and they *had* bled the aliens. It was difficult to be sure, but he was certain that they'd killed upwards of a thousand of the oversized bastards, perhaps more. They'd certainly adapted their tactics, he acknowledged. After several tries at engaging British troops in house-to-house combat, they'd pulled back and dropped rocks on the fighting positions. It was clear, no matter how much he wanted to hide it, that further open conflict was no longer an option.

The thought was a bitter pill to swallow. Ever since the

development of modern communications, British commanders had been in control of their forces at all times — sometimes to excess. After all, performance in the field was rarely improved by having a distant superior with an imperfect grasp of the tactical scene issuing orders that were impossible to obey. But now the British Army — what was left of it — was going to fragment into a thousand tiny partisan groups, each one operating with minimal oversight from higher authority. God alone knew how it would work out. Outside of the Special Forces — the SAS, the SBS, the SRR and a handful of other units that were still highly classified — they'd never planned for insurgency warfare. The possibility of having to fight one in Britain itself had never been envisaged.

Clearly our imagination was somewhat limited, he thought, sourly. It would be very difficult to produce weapons, or bring in supplies from overseas. God knew that many civilians were already starving, unable to feed themselves or their families. Far too many of them would start collaborating with the aliens if it was the only way to keep their families alive. How could he blame them, let alone start issuing orders for the cold-blooded murder of collaborators…?

"Pass the order," he said. "All units are to execute Exodus immediately. And tell them I wished them good luck."

The field support team was already stripping down the mobile command post, removing all the sensitive equipment and preparing it for transfer to hiding places in the north. They'd have to abandon the vehicles themselves — there was no way to hide them from prowling alien aircraft — but at least they could leave a few surprises behind for the alien soldiers. A handful of grenades had already been set aside for improvised IEDs.

"Brigadier," Lieutenant-Colonel Jean-Luc Baptiste said. Gavin hadn't even noticed the Frenchman until he spoke, if only because he was lost in thought. There was no longer any point in giving orders. They'd have to rely on their own men in the field. "I think it's probably time for us to go."

Gavin frowned. He wanted to tell them to stay, but he understood their position. France had been invaded too, and they wanted to join the French Resistance — if there was a French resistance. They'd barely been able to make contact with isolated French units before the aliens had started their push west. Baptiste and his men would be risking their lives walking to Dover — being careful to give London a wide berth — and then trying to find a boat to take them across the Channel. And after that…? Baptiste had been honest enough to admit that he didn't know. France had been hammered just as hard — perhaps harder — than Britain. It was quite possible that *no* political authority had survived the Battle of Paris.

“If we can’t convince you to stay,” he said, and held out a hand. Baptiste took it and they shook hands firmly. “Travel with one of our detachments heading towards London, at least at first. They’ll give you some cover if you need it.”

“We’d be better on our own,” Baptiste disagreed. Gavin didn’t really blame him. He’d had to detach a number of Londoners to try to slip into the city in hopes of producing up-to-date information, but he knew that the odds were stacked against them. Every man was a volunteer, yet that didn’t make it any easier. He’d never had to order men into a position where he *expected* they would die before now, before the world had turned upside down. “We’ll meet again after all this is over.”

“I hope you’re right,” Gavin said. The last French Resistance had been aided by Britain — and it had never come close to forcing the Germans to leave France alone. Now… Britain was invaded too, as was America and the rest of the world. How long could they keep an insurgency going when there were no outside sources of supply? “I wish you the very best of luck.”

* * *

“Time to pull out, lads,” the burly Royal Marine Sergeant said. No one argued with him. They’d expected nearly a hundred soldiers, but only thirty-seven had made it to the RV point. Some of the brief stories they’d exchanged in whispers had been horrifying. No one was really surprised that higher command had finally ordered them to leave. “Let’s go.”

Chris marched with the others, hearing the sound of thunder in the distance as the aliens continued their advance. If they were lucky, they’d escape the aliens and reach a place where they could build shelters and hide from the advance. And then they’d return to the fight.

Chapter Fourteen

London
United Kingdom, Day 6

"You have to give the bastard credit," Constable Richardson muttered to Robin. "How many people does he have here, do you think?"

Robin scanned the school's assembly hall and frowned. Someone had *definitely* been busy; a set of tables had been lined up, with chairs, laptop computers and a handful of coffee machines bubbling merrily away in one corner. The men behind the desks were civil servants, the epitome of evil to most British citizens — which probably explained why so many had agreed to serve the aliens. Their families would be starving if they refused, Robin knew, but the cynic in him wondered if the civil servants cared. They certainly spent most of their time creating red tape for the harassed coppers on the beat.

"Twenty here," he said. They'd opened dozens of makeshift registration halls, converting schools, gyms and warehouses into places for their collaborators to work. Robin had spent a few minutes puzzling over why they'd only used large buildings before realising that the aliens would have problems in smaller human dwellings. But then, they'd certainly shown no reluctance to remodel human buildings with high explosive. London had spent six days shivering on the edge of anarchy and only fear of the aliens had kept it in check. "There could be thousands in London alone."

The thought was a chilling one. Hundreds of thousands of people had worked for the British Government. Many would have been killed in the fighting or the chaos that had gripped parts of the city, but many more would have survived — and grown hungry. The aliens were offering them food and drink and Robin couldn't blame many of them for agreeing to serve the aliens in any way. Their families would have starved otherwise. The thought kept mocking him. His wife might starve if he refused to serve the aliens. And yet… where did collaboration end?

There were thirty policemen in the building with orders to keep order — and use whatever force was necessary to remove trouble-makers. The aliens had converted London's stadiums into makeshift detention camps and — according to rumour — they'd established much larger holding centres outside the cities. Anyone who caused trouble was to be removed to the detention camps and no one knew what would happen to them afterwards. The aliens had caused so much damage to London that Robin suspected that one of the jobs

assigned to prisoners would be clearing up the debris and clearing blocked roadways of ruined cars.

The policemen were unarmed. Robin cursed the Home Office under his breath, even as he silently remembered the weapons they'd hidden in the city. The aliens had insisted that all weapons be surrendered — and they'd had the records to see how many weapons were unaccounted for. Robin was privately astonished that they'd accepted that several hundred pistols and rifles could go missing — or be reported destroyed — and it made him wonder if the aliens had already penetrated his little cell. Maybe they were only waiting for the policemen to be surplus to requirements before they dropped a hammer on their heads.

He felt dirty as the bell finally rang and they opened the doors. The aliens had been broadcasting the same message for days — using their so-called Prime Minister Beresford as the speaker — ordering all of London's residents to present themselves for registration. Anyone who failed to register within the week, they'd warned the public, would be arrested when they failed to produce a registration card and face indefinite detention. In truth, Robin had no idea just what the aliens intended to do with humanity in the long-term. Slavery seemed unlikely for a race that could cross the interstellar gulfs of space. But unless there was a hope of victory, he didn't dare start to fight back.

"Form lines," he ordered, silently praying that no one would start anything. Many of the people waiting outside looked desperate. They would be hungry; London's shops had been looted and there hadn't been much of anything brought in from outside the city. "Remain calm and form lines — you will all be dealt with in time."

Some of the citizens were staring at the policemen with sullen, angry faces. Others seemed too nervous to care, or were perhaps even relieved that they were dealing with human police, rather than aliens. Some probably didn't even *believe* in the aliens. The internet — what was left of it — had included a conspiracy theory that suggested that there had really been a military coup and the whole story of aliens was intended to keep the British public quiet while the Generals took over. Robin might have been tempted to believe the story if he hadn't seen the aliens. They were chillingly real.

The lines snaked towards the civil servants, who started processing the citizens with bland indifference. They'd been told to bring ID — driving licences or passports — which suggested to Robin that the aliens had managed to capture almost all of the government's records. There would be no chance for anyone to change their name and identity in the chaos, not if the aliens — and their collaborators — had anything to say about it. Robin silently prayed that everything would go perfectly, without him and his men having

to intervene. God alone knew how the aliens would react if they had to run the city on their own. They could simply leave the civilian population to starve…

"Here," one oversized man bellowed, suddenly. "How am I supposed to eat this, you dozy cow?"

Robin started towards him, one hand dropping to the truncheon at his belt. The man was staring at a package of food from the piles behind the tables, food produced by the aliens. Robin had had a taste and wondered if anyone could actually be induced to *like* the stuff — it tasted faintly of leather, at best. The aliens insisted that the semi-bread was good to feed a family for four for several days, but Robin knew better. If nothing else, eating the same bland food for more than a few days would be severely demoralising.

"You cut it up and you put it in your mouth," the civil servant repeated in the same bored tone. She'd been working for the Department of Transportation before the aliens had arrived, just another pen-pusher in a department that had more pen-pushers than it had drivers or engineers. "It's perfectly simple…"

"It's muck," the man proclaimed, loudly. There was a murmur of agreement from several in the crowd. The lines were starting to jostle. "I can't feed my family on this shit!"

Robin caught his arm. "That's enough, sir," he said, trying to project a mixture of stern warning and the promise of excessive violence into his voice. They'd been told that appearing confident and unmoveable would prevent people from trying to pick fights with the police. Personally, Robin would have preferred a year of hard labour for each yob who thought he could get away with chucking a beer bottle at a hard-working policeman. "The lady's just doing her job…"

The man swung around and threw a punch at Robin, who jumped back automatically, whipping out his truncheon. A lady — a sad, beating-looking mother of two kids — tried to hold her husband back, but he shrugged off her arm and came after Robin. Robin didn't hesitated; he carefully lashed out with his truncheon, hitting the man in the chest. He folded over and hit the floor with a terrific crash. It would have been a media circus in the old days, with reports of police brutality hitting the airwaves faster than light, but now… he shivered as he realised that they could get away with almost anything, as long as they obeyed the aliens. The thought was terrifying. He knew dozens of coppers who would have liked to take the gloves off and just teach young hooligans some respect the hard way. What would they do without restraints?

He pushed the thought aside as he used a plastic tie to secure the man and then dragged him into a corner. "Don't worry about him," he said, to his wife. She was on the verge of either crying or lashing out

at him herself. He couldn't really blame her for either. "I'll try to see to it that he gets back home ok."

The lines moved quicker now that the police had shown that they were ready to deal with any challenge. It didn't get any easier. Crying children constantly drowned out every other sound, despite the frantic attempts by their parents to calm them down. Older children looked around, bemused by what they were seeing, while their parents were clearly terrified. Robin understood just how they were feeling. The world — the world they'd grown up in — was no more. All of the old certainties were gone.

He caught sight of a dozen different ethnic groups and winced inwardly. Indians and Pakistanis, Arabs and Jamaicans… some from communities that had a long history of confrontation with the police. He had to wade in to stop a Pakistani man from attacking one of the civil servants, apparently outraged because he'd been told that his wife had to remove her veil. The mood in the building rapidly turned ugly, but he resisted the urge to call for backup. An alien patrol with live weapons would arrive and probably shoot a few dozen innocent citizens to restore order. That was the last thing he wanted.

Another scuffle caught his eye, one that seemed to spring out of nowhere — and then he saw the ID card. It was a military ID, one that identified its bearer as a serving member of the Royal Navy. He didn't want to act, but there was no choice. The policemen closed in rapidly and led the sailor away, leaving his wife behind. They'd been given no choice in the matter — all serving members of the military, whatever the service, were to be arrested and handed over to the aliens. He told himself that the sailor would have a chance to escape — they'd carefully not secured the holding area they'd made in one of the classrooms — but it was small comfort. The eyes of the sailor's wife and baby child would haunt his nightmares for the rest of time.

Dear God, he prayed, silently. *Please let this be over soon*.

He ran through the figures in his head. The population of Greater London was estimated at around eight million. Some would have died in the fighting, or in the chaos, or… maybe of simple starvation. The remainder were all expected to register within the week, or face arrest. How long would it take to register eight million people? It could take weeks, or even months.

Silently, he damned himself. But what else could he do?

* * *

Doctor Fatima Hasid had never liked crowded rooms, even as a child. She'd skipped classes at the mosque because there were too

many girls crammed into the small room put aside for women — the boys had a far larger room, and a better teacher — and she'd stopped going to them shortly after she entered secondary school. The NHS had had its fair share of crowded rooms, but as a doctor she'd been able to avoid them and see patients one by one. Entering the registry office was a foretaste of hell.

The lines seemed never-ending and she was silently relieved that she'd managed to convince her superiors to give her the afternoon off. London still had thousands of wounded on its hands, but they'd finally managed to get the worst of the wounded into proper hospitals — even if they had had to distribute them over Britain. The remainder, the ones who hadn't been seriously injured, had had to be sent home. It had broken her heart to do it, but there'd been no choice. Their supplies had dropped to dangerously low levels.

Ahead of her, some boys were pushing and shoving. She hated to think what it was going to be like when her stepmother and her overweight sons and their relatives came to register themselves. Some of them were talking about refusing to register — after all, they'd had as little to do with the British Government as possible, except when it came to claiming benefits. Fatima suspected that if they tried to defy the aliens — the aliens they didn't really believe in — they'd find that the aliens hammered them into the ground. The stories she'd heard from some of her patients were horrific.

She pulled her arms around herself as the queue kept inching forward, finally allowing her to catch sight of a desk. It was no surprise to see a human — a set of humans — standing behind it, trying to handle the paperwork. The aliens wouldn't have wanted to waste their manpower on such a piddling task. Whatever the claims that they were all-powerful — the radio had certainly been assuring the British population that resistance was futile — there had to be limits on their manpower. Alien-power? She was still mulling that over when she finally reached the desk and sat down in front of the civil servant.

"Name, address, proof of identity…"

The words rattled out and Fatima did her best to answer. It seemed that no one else from her family had registered yet, which was hardly a surprise. The amount of data the aliens were collecting puzzled her for a long moment, before she realised that they probably had sophisticated computers capable of mining through the vast datafiles and drawing conclusions in a way that no human could match. It struck her that they were experienced at invading and occupying planets — and if that was the case, who else had they fought? There had always been stories of UFOs flying around and kidnapping people, flown by little grey men with anal fixations.

Maybe they were real after all…

"You're a doctor," the civil servant said. "You're in one of the protected categories."

Fatima frowned, leaning forward. "Protected categories?"

"They're looking for people with certain skills," the civil servant admitted. "Doctors and nurses… they're needed right where they are, so they probably won't send for you and put you to work somewhere else. Others… they're not so lucky. The men who register today who aren't in a protected category will probably find themselves ordered to do brute labour in a week's time."

"I see," Fatima said. "And you know this… how?"

"I don't," the civil servant said, "but I think it's a reasonable guess, don't you?"

Fatima couldn't disagree. A machine on the desk buzzed and whirred, and finally discharged an ID card. Fatima studied it, trying to keep her consternation off her face. She hadn't even *noticed* the camera, but there was a picture of her on the front of the card. It seemed that there were limits to alien technology after all, part of her mind noted. Every photograph she'd had taken for official purposes had managed to make her look bad, mad, dead or some combination of the three. The alien technology was no better.

"Carry it with you at all times," the civil servant warned. "There's a hefty fine if you lose it — and failing to produce it on demand could mean arrest, or worse. I don't think they have lawyers telling them what they can and cannot do to prisoners…"

Fatima thanked him and left. Outside, night was already starting to fall and so she hurried home. A curfew had been declared and there were already terrible rumours about what happened to those caught outside by the aliens. And her stepmother would bitch and moan if she was home late. They were supposed to be hosting guests soon and she was required to help. She would almost sooner have faced the aliens.

* * *

Alan Beresford stood in an office that had once belonged to a banking CEO and stared out over London. The city was finally coming back to life at nights, even though the curfew meant that many who would once have been outside partying would be tucked up safe at home, doubtless wondering when their world would shatter around them once again. It was *his* world now… well, his and a few aliens, but it seemed they didn't care about the perks he claimed for himself as long as he did a good job. And he *had* done a good job. It had been

his idea to put the civil servants back to work, along with the men who ran the electricity and water companies. London was coming back to life — and so was the rest of the country.

The aliens were ruthlessly pragmatic, but they clearly didn't have the manpower to govern all of Britain, let alone the world. Alan was still unsure of what they actually wanted in the long run, but he was confident that he would be able to find a way to be useful to them. And he had his own long-term plans. He'd put friends and cronies in positions of power all over the country, laying a network that could be used in his own interests as well as those of his masters. It helped that the Prime Minister appeared to have vanished somewhere in the chaos of the first few days. Apart from a single message which was proving alarmingly persistent on the internet, no one had heard anything from him. It was quite possible that he was dead.

Losing Prince Harry was equally annoying. Harry was King now that his father and brother were both dead. Alan doubted that the population of Britain would rise in outrage at losing their King, but Harry could have made an excellent figurehead for a new Britain. Or perhaps not. He'd been a soldier and would probably have old-fashioned ideas about loyalty and honour and service to his country running through his veins.

Foolish, Alan told himself, and smiled. Loyalty and honour meant nothing these days — and they'd meant little before the aliens arrived. All that mattered was what one did for one's own self — and if it meant stamping on a few toes… well, you couldn't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs.

He lifted his glass — an expensive wine, but it had been easy to obtain in starving London — and drank a silent toast. To power, he told himself… and to those bold enough to seize it.

Chapter Fifteen

North England
United Kingdom, Day 8

Haddon Hall was one of the original stately England manors, built before the English Civil War by a loyalist who had lost his life fighting for Good King Charles. It was a regal building, although hopelessly impractical for military purposes, surrounded by gardens that regularly won awards in regional and national contests. Some people would have found it a paradise, a chance to play at being an English aristocrat. Gabriel Burley found it maddening. It was a prison by any other name, a place where he could do anything — except leave. The handful of security staff — really soldiers wearing civilian clothes — were polite and friendly, but they wouldn't let him leave. He was too important to risk falling into enemy hands.

The thought made him snort in disgust as he paced the massive library. Two years ago, he'd been a junior MP with ideals, ideals that were being worn down by contact with real-life politics. How could he hope to achieve anything without compromise — and by compromising, he was steadily turning into a true politician, a man who compromised everything for the sake of power and position. A man like Alan Beresford.

He snorted again as he picked up a book, glanced at it and put it down again. His host had given him the run of the house, and the use of an extensive collection of books, DVDs and even old-fashioned records, but it was still a prison. He couldn't concentrate on anything, apart from his feelings of hopelessness. His position as Prime Minister was meaningless, save in name only. The invasion that gripped the country proved that, whatever he told himself; he could hardly command the aliens to leave, could he? Their forces held the entire country now, surrounding cities and trapping the civilian population within their homes. God alone knew what they would do when the resistance went to work. They'd certainly shown no sign of any scruples when dealing with unarmed civilians.

The television remained bland, with old movies and soaps being played regularly, rather than the BBC's news programs. Gabriel knew some of what was going on all over the world, but it didn't help his mood. The aliens were tightening their grip — Dear God, had it only been eight days since they'd revealed themselves and descended upon a shocked and paralysed Earth? Gabriel almost wished that they would discover his hiding place and try to snatch him. At least running away would be doing something. Instead, all he could do was

wait and hope that someone — somehow — found a way to hurt the aliens enough to make them leave. The military hadn't been too hopeful. As long as the aliens dominated space above Earth, they could call down strikes against rebel towns and cities — or, if worst came to worst, exterminate the human race. Gabriel remembered all the films he'd seen with asteroids crashing into the planet and shivered. The aliens would have no trouble pushing an asteroid towards Earth and the human race wouldn't be saved by a patriotic scriptwriter. It even made him long for *Independence Day*.

There was a cough behind him and he jumped, one hand falling to the pistol he'd been told to carry at all times — and save the final bullet for himself, if the aliens caught up with him. Brigadier Gavin Lightbridge-Stewart seemed rather amused — Gabriel hadn't even realised that he'd entered the room — but Gabriel was pleased to see him. He hadn't been allowed an internet connection, not when the aliens might use it to track him down. Outside news — accurate outside news — only came in fits and starts.

"Prime Minister," Lightbridge-Stewart said, gravely. "I trust that you are well?"

"I've told you to call me Gabriel," Gabriel said, impatiently. He didn't know where Lightbridge-Stewart had made his headquarters or even any operational details at all. What he didn't know he couldn't tell — and he had no illusions about his ability to hold out under torture. Or perhaps the aliens had perfect lie detectors and truth drugs. "What have you heard from the… outside?"

Lightbridge-Stewart smiled. "Elements of the Royal Scots are preparing fall-back positions in the Highlands," he said. "The aliens may control the cities, but they'll find extending their control into the Highlands a little harder than they'd prefer. They may even decide to abandon the Highlands altogether."

Gabriel nodded, half-wishing that he could go north and join the Scots. There were plenty of areas in England where humans could hide out from the aliens, but Scotland had a smaller civilian population at risk. But he knew that he could never take an active role in the fighting to come. They couldn't risk their Prime Minister, even if the position *was* meaningless.

"King Harry isn't adjusting well," Lightbridge-Stewart added. "He wants to fight back, not hide out somewhere in Scotland. But I'm afraid we don't have much choice."

"I can't disagree," Gabriel said. He hadn't even been in politics when there had been an almighty political struggle over deploying then-Prince Harry to Iraq and Afghanistan. In the end, he'd been allowed to go — as long as it wasn't made public. It was ironic, really; the British Monarchy had held mostly ceremonial roles, yet Harry

hadn't been allowed to be a public sign that the Monarchy was willing to fight too. What made Harry any better than the hundreds of other soldiers who'd lost their lives in Iraq or Afghanistan? There had been no good answer, save that the enemy would have made capturing him a priority. His presence would have risked the lives of other soldiers.

Lightbridge-Stewart shrugged. "There's some good news," he said. "And some bad news as well, I'm afraid. We managed to recover a dead alien body in the retreat from Salisbury Plain and get it to a… well, a covert military medical research establishment. The doctors there took some time to dissect the body and draw a number of conclusions. I brought copies of their reports, but the interesting detail is that they're really not that different from us."

"They look like leathery dinosaurs," Gabriel observed. It still pained him that he hadn't seen any of the aliens at first-hand, but his minders had been clear. He couldn't risk being recognised. "And yet they're not that different from us?"

"Compared to what we were expecting, yes," Lightbridge-Stewart said. "Which isn't really good news in the long run. They can make use of our planet and presumably eat our crops — although I don't know if they'll actually *like* them. However, the doctors believe that they cannot catch our diseases — which rather puts the leash on any *War of the Worlds* scenarios we might have been hoping for."

Gabriel frowned. "And can we catch *their* diseases?"

"They don't think so," Lightbridge-Stewart said. "But they don't really have any samples of alien diseases to study."

"No," Gabriel agreed. "They wouldn't."

He'd studied history, back when he'd thought about becoming a historian. Back when Europe had discovered America, they'd brought their diseases with them — diseases that the Native Americans had had no resistance to. Smallpox alone had killed millions, leaving a void for the Europeans to expand into and eventually control. The empires built on native labour had collapsed; the empires based on settlers had survived and prospered. And if an alien disease got loose on Earth…

It might not even have to be natural, he realised. He'd certainly had enough briefings about the dangers of biological warfare, up to and including genetically-modified diseases that were resistant to every known vaccine. The aliens didn't have to reshape one of their own diseases to produce a monster that would exterminate humanity. They could simply rely on a simple human disease, with a little modification. Britain had no — official — stocks of Smallpox, but if the aliens had captured the stores in Russia, or America…

He pushed the thought aside. There was no point in worrying about it. They were at the mercy of the aliens and would be for years

to come.

"The analysts think that the aliens will probably start growing their own crops on Earth sooner rather than later," Lightbridge-Stewart said. "Unless they've somehow managed to produce stable wormholes that reach from planet to planet, their logistics have to be rather touchy. Growing their own food will allow them to send more weapons and military supplies instead…"

"And there's nothing we can do about it," Gabriel said. "I don't suppose that anyone else has come up with a possible solution? Maybe hacking into their computers and shutting down their weapons…?"

"This is the real world, unfortunately," Lightbridge-Stewart said. He frowned, suddenly. "What I can tell you is that there is a certain… crude nature to most of their technology. We've captured samples of their weapons and taken them apart to study — in many ways, their weapons are actually less advanced than our own. That could be just them being practical — the more complex a piece of kit, the greater the chance it will break in the field — or their overall technology level could be less advanced than we've assumed. And for that matter…"

He hesitated. "It's hard to be sure, but their tactical doctrine sucks," he added. "If they didn't have those starships in orbit, we would have beaten them — and so would almost every other First World nation on the planet. Hell, even the Saudis would have given them a very hard time. I don't know who they're used to fighting, but they clearly haven't learned much from the experience. The analysts have studied the problem, yet they can't see any clear solution. It's possible that someone else gave them their technology…"

Gabriel stared at him. "Someone else *sold* them their technology…? Who?"

"There's no way to know," Lightbridge-Stewart admitted. "Another alien race, we presume — or maybe they captured technology from another alien race and somehow discovered how to duplicate it for themselves. We certainly didn't hesitate to sell tanks and guns to the Middle East, even though there was a strong chance that they would wind up being pointed back at us. For all we know, they stole the starships they have in orbit — and the weapons they're using against us on the ground may be their own designs."

"But there's no way to know," Gabriel said. He shook his head slowly. "Is there any good news?"

"Well, I've had a team of signals experts — very bright boffins, these lads — studying the alien communications system," Lightbridge-Stewart said. "It really isn't as advanced as our own — but then, we don't really understand their language yet so we may have problems unlocking some of their secrets." He smiled, briefly. "But we do have some idea of how their command-and-control network functions. It

seems that their junior officers don't have much independence of action. They may not even have the ability to call in strikes from orbit without permission from higher authority."

He looked down at the floor, shaking his head. "God knows we had enough problems with calling in strikes while we were in Afghanistan," he said. "It may account for odd delays in their response times — we managed to get troops out of positions we knew would be bombarded before the hammer finally fell. Or we may be making a dreadful mistake because their system *looks* familiar to us. They're aliens and their idea of logic may not make sense to human minds."

"They've been taking prisoners and registering the entire population," Gabriel said. "Doesn't that make sense from a human point of view?"

"I'm very much afraid so," Lightbridge-Stewart agreed. "We have — had — political considerations in how we treated civilians caught up in occupied zones. It was never politically possible to impose our control with an iron hand — and that cost us badly. The aliens, on the other hand, seem to be registering our people with an eye to keeping them under firm control — and weeding out those who might be able to resist. Luckily we managed to get most of the TA and reservists called up and out of the cities before the aliens started arresting military personnel. God alone knows what they're doing with them."

Gabriel shivered. The reports had all been the same, even though they'd come from places as far apart as Southampton and Aberdeen. All civilians had to be registered — and military personnel were taken away, along with police and other emergency service workers who refused to collaborate. No one knew where the aliens had taken them, but Gabriel had no difficulty picturing them being executed by alien gunfire… or simply tossed from alien shuttles into the Pacific Ocean. The aliens had set up detention camps, but they all seemed to be for civilians. He could only hope that the military personnel were kept alive, elsewhere. The alternative was too depressing to contemplate.

"And we don't know what they have in mind in the long run," Lightbridge-Stewart added. "Perhaps they intend to isolate fatties and have them cooked for dinner — we believe they could probably eat human flesh."

Gabriel felt sick. "I don't think that any civilised race would want to eat human flesh," he said — but then, what *was* a civilised race? He'd thought that humanity, for all its faults, was making progress towards a better world for all, yet the aliens had knocked humanity down within two days of their arrival. The reports from Africa — where the aliens had almost no presence at all — suggested that mass chaos was spreading across the continent. Was the inner savage as far

removed from the civilised man as he wanted to believe? “I’m sure they have something less… extreme in mind for us.”

“I don’t know,” Lightbridge-Stewart said. “I just don’t think we’ll enjoy it when the penny finally drops.”

“I haven’t enjoyed anything since the aliens arrived,” Gabriel said, ruefully. He hesitated. Even now, there were things he didn’t feel comfortable discussing. “Is there… anything we can do about their damned puppet?”

“You mean assassinate him?” Lightbridge-Stewart said. “I admit that we’ve been looking at the possibility. But the aliens keep him under very tight guard — it’s almost as if they think we might take a shot at him.” He smiled. “We’re working on the possibility, Prime Minister, but it may take some time.”

He hesitated. “And we have to decide if we’re going to wage war on collaborators as well as the aliens,” he added. “Some are joining up because they need to feed their families; some are joining up because they believe that it’s for the best… and some are joining up because they want power. And as long as the aliens have thousands of expendable humans to deploy against us, it will be a great deal harder to convince them to withdraw.”

Gabriel shivered. Western Governments had been alarmingly sensitive to casualties and bad publicity, something their enemies hadn’t hesitated to use against them. The terrorists had targeted soldiers, intent on causing as many fatalities as possible, and done their best to provoke incidents that could be spun against the Western troops. Any civilian deaths were always blamed on the West — and the fact that they’d been used as human shields by men who wore civilian clothes, or caught in bombs planted by their fellow countrymen, was never mentioned.

But they had no way of knowing what the aliens would consider acceptable losses — or bad publicity. Perhaps their homeworld had protest marches, with thousands of young and idealistic aliens marching to ‘save the human,’ or perhaps they were a fascist state, with all dissent ruthlessly suppressed. And if it was the latter, they might be prepared to endure terrifying losses to keep Earth firmly under their control — or blow up the planet if they felt that they had no choice, but to withdraw.

“So we go after the aliens first,” Gabriel said, “and only go after the collaborators if they’re nasty bastards who abuse their power?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Lightbridge-Stewart agreed. “But there *will* be casualties, Prime Minister. We don’t even know how many civilians died in the last few days.”

Once, Gabriel would have been appalled — hell, he still was appalled. But there was nothing he could do about it. The aliens

couldn't be ordered out of Britain by the Prime Minister.

"We have managed to set up a reasonably secure communications link with America," Lightbridge-Stewart said, after a moment. "Most of the American personnel in Britain want to go home and fight there, although that will be tricky. The aliens aren't allowing big ships to leave harbour — we can get them to Ireland, which hasn't been occupied, but I don't see how we can get many of them to the United States. It may be possible to use submarines…"

"But that would mean risking a boat," Gabriel said, slowly. Lightbridge-Stewart nodded. The remaining submarines in the Royal Navy — as well as ones belonging to America, France and the rest of Europe — had been ordered to run silent, run deep. The aliens didn't seem to be capable of tracking submerged boats from orbit, but they could see a surfaced submarine and drop a rock on it. "Are the Yanks going to take the risk?"

"I don't think so," Lightbridge-Stewart said. "They took higher absolute losses than we did and their country is much more heavily occupied. I suspect they can probably keep an insurgency going for longer than we can, but…"

He shrugged. "If we could just get them out of orbit, we could deal with their garrisons on the surface," he concluded. "But as long as they're in orbit, they can hold a gun to our heads."

Gabriel couldn't disagree. They could hurt the aliens, but they could never beat them. And if they couldn't beat them, was there any point in fighting at all? And yet, if they surrendered, there was no way of knowing what the aliens had in mind for the human race.

"Thank you for coming," he said, cursing his own weakness. "Will you stay for dinner?"

"I have to link up with a couple of others," Lightbridge-Stewart said, reluctantly. "We have plans to make. And then we can start reminding the aliens that we exist."

Chapter Sixteen

Long Stratton
United Kingdom, Day 10/11

The convoy looked like something out of Iraq, or Afghanistan. It comprised a handful of trucks, each one carrying a dozen policemen, and a pair of alien Armoured Personnel Carriers. It was escorted by a pair of helicopters, bristling with weapons, that flew elaborate patterns over the vehicles. From her vantage point, hidden near the town, Alex wondered if the alien pilots were showing off, or genuinely concerned about the threat of portable antiaircraft weapons. There was no way to know, but she suspected the former. The aliens, despite appearances, didn't look as if they were expecting trouble.

She gritted her teeth as the aliens started to dismount their vehicles, weapons at the ready, followed by their tame policemen. The internet had been ranting and raving about collaborators — and so many rumours that it was difficult to know what was fact and what was fiction — but actually seeing collaborators in the flesh was a different story. They looked as if they were confident, expecting no opposition — and they might be right. The BBC had been claiming that the remainder of the British military had been destroyed; looking down at the aliens, Alex started to wonder if they had been telling the truth. She might be the last surviving servicewoman in Britain.

No, she told herself firmly. That couldn't be true. She was isolated, but there would be others out there somewhere, waiting for the chance to hit back at their new enemies. And even if she *was* alone, she still had her duty. All she had to do was wait until the right moment. Until then, she just had to watch and allow the memories to become burned into her mind. The aliens and their collaborators had arrived in Long Stratton.

They'd developed their own procedure for securing towns and villages by now. The policemen used loudspeakers to summon all of the townsfolk out of their homes and ordered them to wait on the green while the aliens searched the village. Looking at their big hulking forms, Alex felt a chill running down her spine. She would have sooner believed in a rogue military officer launching a coup than in aliens, even though she'd seen their aircraft. The clattering of the helicopters grew louder as one skimmed over her position, so low that Alex was convinced, just for a few moments, that she'd been spotted. There was no way to know what the townspeople were telling the policemen down below.

She shuddered. The aliens had made their instructions quite clear;

everyone in the country was to be registered, fingerprinted and given an ID card — no exceptions. And the internet had made it clear that the moment they discovered that she was a RAF pilot, they would take her away and no one would know what had happened to her. So she'd taken the risk of hiding, along with a handful of young men who were willing to resist the aliens. Alex hoped that it wasn't all just mindless bravado. There was no way to know what someone was made of until the shit hit the fan, by which time it might be too late. It was one of the reasons why military training was so intensive, in the hopes of weeding out the unsuitable before it was too late.

And if her little band was caught…? There was no way to know. The aliens might simply execute them on the spot, or take them to one of their detention camps or… she shook her head, concentrating on the scene before her. One by one, the townspeople were being processed and registered. Smith and his wife had remained on their farm. They probably wouldn't be processed until later — she hoped. And they'd been warned not to breathe a word about her…

One hand touched the pistol at her belt as the hours wore on. Watching made it seem almost surreal, with the aliens watching over their collaborators — their unarmed collaborators. Alex found that a warming sight; it was clear that the aliens didn't trust the policemen with live weapons. Perhaps the police hadn't been so badly subverted after all. But she couldn't count on anything…

Down below, a scuffle had broken out. She peered, wishing she'd dared bring a pair of binoculars, trying to make out what was going on. The policemen had pulled a man out of the crowd, a middle-aged gentleman she didn't know. Why… she realised why a moment later, just as she saw his crying wife and older children. He'd been in the army and returned to life as a civilian. It hadn't been enough to save him, or his son. The young man had lunged at a policeman, only to be knocked down and arrested by another. God alone knew what would happen to them.

She gritted her teeth again, forcing herself to watch. Whatever else happened, she would not forget. And those who had been killed would be avenged.

* * *

Night was falling as she approached the disused barn, one that had once belonged to a farmer who had sold out and left the country. It had fallen into a dilapidated state, but her small team had done wonders to ensure that no light could be seen coming from the barn in the darkness. The aliens didn't seem to patrol the country very

effectively, yet there was no point in taking chances. They were taking quite enough with the elderly explosives as it was.

"They used to put this stuff in flour," Archer was saying to his small group of students. "The Chinese would use it to smuggle gunk past the Japanese — it could actually be baked and eaten without poisoning the poor bastard who actually ate it. We may have to use it the same way."

Alex frowned. The collection of weapons and explosives from World War Two had been looked after carefully, but an alarming number had decayed badly. Some of the detonator pens — designed for early IEDs — were unreliable. They'd been state of the art in 1940, Archer had assured her, but now… they would have to be careful. There were some nasty tricks that could be played with even disused explosives, yet… she had nightmares where one of the students accidentally blew up the barn or the weapons store. At least they'd managed to scatter smaller dumps around the area. Losing one wouldn't cost them everything.

"I think it's time for a break," Archer said, as he spied her. The young men stood up and scattered. They'd been warned to be very careful — and avoid the aliens at all costs. "Did you find out what you wanted to know?"

Alex nodded, but waited for the barn to empty before she spoke. "They're parked in a camping field, some miles away," she said, flatly. "I think they'll have to leave the way they came, unless they intend to go cross-country."

Archer nodded. "I have the surprise all ready for them," he said. "I'm coming with you…"

"No, you're not," Alex said, flatly. "You know much more about these weapons than I do. We can't afford to lose you — at least not yet."

Archer didn't look pleased, but he accepted her comment. "Make sure you place it properly," he said, firmly. "I spent too much trouble making it to have you fail to blow up the right people."

Twenty minutes later, Alex and two of the lads headed out over the countryside, heading for where the collaborators were parked. She was mildly surprised that the aliens had chosen to stay with them, but it worked in her favour. Assuming that the aliens were jumpy and had night-vision gear, she kept her small force from going any closer than the grit bin she'd noticed by the side of the road. It took longer than she'd feared to empty the grit into the road and pack the bomb into the bin, but they made it. Her first IED didn't look very professional, yet it should do the trick. Or so she told herself.

Sending the two boys back to their homes, she found a hiding place and settled down to wait. There was no way of knowing just

when the collaborators would start to move, but the aliens — according to the internet — were hard taskmasters. They might well decide to start when dawn rose above the horizon, whatever their human subordinates thought. Besides, it was almost traditional to attack at dawn. Any human force would be awake and on guard at that point, at least if it was on deployment.

She was yawning when she heard two helicopters high overhead, followed by the sound of vehicle engines rumbling into life. It wasn't quite dawn yet — perhaps the aliens were harder taskmasters than she had assumed. Or perhaps they were just bastards. It hardly mattered. A moment later, she saw lights in the distance, suggesting that the aliens were on their way. She'd been worried about accidentally blowing up civilians, but most civilian vehicles had run out of petrol in the last few days. The remaining supplies were being carefully hoarded.

The lead alien vehicle came around the bend and accelerated down the road. Alex was mildly impressed by how it seemed to glide above the ground — it was almost silent compared to the trucks carrying policemen — but there was no time to stare. She reached for the detonator and held it in her hand, cradling it while running her finger over the button. There were no safety features, Archer had told her, with a thin leer. They'd been less careful in those days. Of course, the planned resistance cells in Britain had also had more training than Alex had ever received. If there was ever a day when the RAF returned to service, she made a mental note to insist that ground combat skills were included in what they taught their pilots.

Just before the alien vehicle reached the grit bin, she pushed down on the button. There was a heart-stopping pause — and then there was a thunderous explosion. The alien vehicle was picked up and flung right into the following truck, crushing a number of policemen under its weight. An engine caught fire and another truck went up in flames, just before two more trucks collided with the vehicles ahead of them. The second alien vehicle was untouched, but the alien infantry dismounted anyway. They moved with eerie grace as they surrounded the scene, clearly expecting another attack at any moment. Alex silently cursed her own oversight. She could have had several men with hunting rifles in position to pick off most of the aliens — but then, they would have had to risk remaining at the scene long enough for reinforcements to arrive.

She'd had time to plan her own exit and so she ran, keeping her head down and praying that she wouldn't be noticed. The alien helicopters had returned to the convoy to hover menacingly over the ruined vehicles, no doubt looking for enemy insurgents to target and kill. She almost fainted as she heard the sound of gunfire, before

realising that the aliens were shooting at rabbits. The noise had flushed a number of the little beasts out of hiding and the aliens had thought that they were humans! She was still grinning at the thought when she headed further into the countryside, back to her hiding place. They'd never find her.

* * *

"You hit the bastards," Smith said, three hours later. The aliens had visited their farm yesterday and given the farmer and his wife their ID cards. Alex had examined them and concluded that the aliens had actually encoded information into the cards — hardly an unfamiliar form of technology, but one with ominous implications for population control. "What do you think they'll do in response?"

Alex shrugged. There was no way to know. She'd actually offered to leave, knowing that her presence would bring danger to their house, but they'd refused to hear of it. Besides, as Smith had assured her, they needed help on the farm. The aliens had stated that they would be expected to start expanding their yield and Alex suspected that failing to produce food for the aliens would result in losing the farm. Their children were still lost somewhere in Britain, unable to return to their home.

She looked down at Smith's ID card. The policemen had been very clear on what the farmer could and could not do. Leaving the county without permission would result in arrest. Failing to produce the card when requested would result in arrest. Their grown children and their families, if they ever arrived, would be expected to report to the aliens through the local police station — or they would be arrested. It seemed that putting even a single foot wrong would result in arrest. Alex could almost understand why they were issuing such edicts; it was as demoralising as hell and it certainly kept humanity under foot. Given enough time, the aliens could start organising the country to suit themselves.

The sound of helicopters — they had to be alien — nearby sent another chill down her spine. How much could they mobilise to hunt her and her little band down? An entire army, a small force of soldiers… or would they bombard the nearest town purely for the hell of it? There was no way to know, but she would have to find out — somehow. She rubbed her face, fought down a yawn, and headed outside. There was work to be done on the farm.

* * *

"But the last time I fought was in Malaya!"

Major Terrence Smyth scowled at the aliens, who seemed unresponsive. For all he knew, they couldn't speak English. It wouldn't be the first time that some conquering bastard had thought that keeping his soldiers from speaking the native tongue would stop them from developing any attachments to the locals. Of course, humans had always been able to communicate, even if by gestures alone. And they'd always wanted the same things — women, money, a chance to go home without having certain vital parts separated from their bodies. The thought of the aliens paying attention to human women was sickening.

The policemen at least looked ashamed, when they bothered to meet his eyes. They'd taken his son away somewhere, purely for the crime of trying to defend his old man. Terrence had fought in Malaya before leaving the British Army, decades ago. It seemed that the aliens didn't give a damn about how long ago a person's military service was — if a person had military experience, he or she was to be arrested and taken away.

He stared around the small holding pen. It was a simple fence of wire, holding seventeen men and one woman, surrounded by the aliens. Escape seemed impossible; even if they'd been able to cut or climb the wires, the aliens would shoot them down before they managed to run away from their base. Hell, he didn't even know what they'd done to the area — they'd set up a handful of oversized buildings surrounding the holding pen. And he wasn't entirely sure of where he was.

Must be getting old, he thought, bitterly. And to think that he'd been planning a comfortable retirement. He was in his seventies, after all, but still as active as ever… well, maybe not as active as he'd been when he'd been a young soldier in the trenches. His wife wanted to travel the world and he'd been happy to oblige her. But now…

He looked up as a heavy lorry roared its way into the camp. The driver was a human, probably yet another of the damned civil servants who'd managed to find a soft landing in the arms of the aliens. Terrence glowered at him, before deciding that he was being unfair. The arsehole might have joined up to feed his family. Not everyone in Britain lived on a farm.

The policemen opened the gates and waved the prisoners forward. They didn't bother to shackle them, but what would be the point? Inside the lorry, they'd be prisoners just as much as they were prisoners inside the holding pen. He shuffled as slowly as he dared until it was his turn to climb into the vehicle, and then he pretended that his leg had failed, staggering down and collapsing on the ground. A moment later, a policeman helped him into the lorry.

He found a place to sit as the doors were closed and the big vehicle made its way out of the camp. There were no windows to allow him to see where they were going. A quick check revealed that they couldn't force open the rear doors to escape. The sound of engines grew louder, suggesting that they had joined a small convoy. Or maybe it was a very large convoy. He found himself praying that resistance fighters — or the remains of his old service — were still out there, ready to attack the convoy, but nothing happened. The hours wore onwards as the truck took them further and further away from the land he'd known.

It almost made him want to cry. His wife, his children… would he ever see them again? Or would the grandchildren grow up without knowing their granddad? He told himself that they wouldn't keep him prisoner forever, but there was no way to know. For all he knew, he might be going to his own execution. But they could have killed him easily without bothering to transport him halfway across the country. Maybe they wanted slave labour, or maybe they just had a holding camp for former military personnel somewhere isolated from the general population. They'd grow old and die there while the aliens took control of the rest of the country they'd sworn to defend. His grandchildren would grow up in a world where the aliens were a fact of life.

Shaking his head, he remembered the hills he'd once climbed as a younger man… and wondered, bitterly, if he would ever see them again.

Chapter Seventeen

London
United Kingdom, Day 15

"They're doing it on purpose," Aashif proclaimed, loudly. The small gathering of young men around him murmured in agreement. "They are showing no respect for our religion at all!"

Seated halfway across the room, with the women and young children, Fatima could still hear him voicing his anger. Aashif was twenty-one years old, born to a family and community that was largely excluded from the mainstream population. A stronger person might have broken down the barriers or carved out a career for themselves, but Aashif — like so many others — had chosen to fall back into his community and wrap himself in a tissue of imaginary grievances. She'd heard it all before; the world was against him, no one liked or trusted him because of his religion, and he had *rights*. It never seemed to have occurred to him that his failures were a result of his personality, or that he could have made something of himself if he tried. He found it so much easier to blame others for his failings.

She rolled her eyes. Men like Aashif were a persistent pain in the posterior. Deprived of the sort of wealth and power they thought the world owed them by rights, they turned upon the women in their lives. Aashif's sister was terrified to talk to strangers for fear that her brother would hear of it and beat her; his mother was a pale shadow of a woman, scared of the boy she'd brought into the world. Only his grandfather had ever been able to exercise any kind of restraint on the young man, and he'd passed away two years ago. She listened to his bragging and shuddered, inwardly. There was a new conviction in his voice that had been missing several months ago.

Not that she could really blame him. The aliens had taken over every building large enough to hold their oversized forms — and that included a number of London's mosques. Even the police had been reluctant to just barge into the mosques, fearing the effect such provocative acts would have on the Muslim community. But the aliens had just taken the buildings and evicted everyone who complained. They'd done the same to a number of churches, yet they seemed to have targeted mosques deliberately. Given the rumours coming from the Middle East — and spread over the internet, along with far too much outright nonsense — it seemed as though they were attacking Islam directly. From what she'd seen herself, Fatima suspected that the aliens simply didn't care. Humans were their property now — and property didn't get a vote, or the right to complain.

"We're going to do something about it," Aashif continued. Bragging about his connections to the underground *Jihad* movement wasn't new either, but she'd always known that he was just a poser, someone who would probably faint dead away at the thought of being asked to blow himself and a great many innocent civilians up. There were too many girls out there who were prepared to allow such claims to overpower their common sense. "I'm going to see to it personally."

Unseen, Fatima rolled her eyes. Of course he would — and while he was at it, he'd create the perfect Islamic State… never mind that such a state only existed in the deluded rants sprouted by preachers with nothing better to do. There were times when she was tempted to believe that suicide bombers were God's way of weeding out the unworthy from the Muslim community. The young fools who died for a dream rarely got to spread their seed.

She shook her head, and then helped her stepmother and the rest of the girls clear away the dishes and wash up. They knew their place, all right — and the fact that she was a doctor cut no ice with the men. Men like Aashif wanted women to stay in their place. It was the only way they could convince themselves that they were in charge. She smiled, in a moment of dark humour. The world could hardly be worse if women were in charge.

* * *

Sergeant Abdul Al-Hasid was feeling dirty. Not the feeling he'd had when he'd first discovered pornographic magazines, despite knowing that his God-fearing father would thrash him to within an inch of his life if he'd been caught looking at naked sluts. And not the feeling he'd had when Salma — his first girlfriend — had allowed him to touch her bare breast. It was the feeling of knowing that he was doing something utterly wrong — and the fact that the people he was helping to do it wanted him to help them didn't make him feel any better. He couldn't shake the feeling that he would be called upon to answer to God and that no answer he could give, nothing he could offer in his own defence, would help his case.

He'd grown up in a strictly Islamic environment — so of course he'd rebelled. School hadn't given him much in the way of qualifications, so the Army had seemed a logical choice. And it had been the making of him. He'd knuckled down at it and worked hard for the first time in his life, deploying to Iraq and then Afghanistan with the Green Jackets. Along the way, he'd seen just what living under Islamic Law really meant — the only people who wanted Taliban-style rule were the people who had never had to live under it.

He'd seen enough to convince him that the rulers, for all their dedication to making others follow the rules, enjoyed breaking them every chance they got. Walking through a Taliban-run whorehouse had been enough to convince him that they had to be stopped. They'd killed the girls rather than risk having them freed by the British Army.

After the aliens had invaded, he'd volunteered to return to London with several other Londoners. They'd known that it would be dangerous — no one could describe the military as a safe job in the best of times — but he'd known people who might be able to help them fight the aliens. Wearing civilian clothes, he'd wandered through the communities with his ears wide open, listening carefully. Finding the would-be suicide bombers had been depressingly easy. Like so many others, they had bad intentions — and no contacts with the underground world. Obtaining explosives on the black market wasn't exactly easy. He'd lost count of how many idiots seeking a quick death had tried to buy weapons and explosives off police informers.

He glanced around the garage, rolling his eyes. Like many other business in the area, as much of the business as possible was done off the books — just to keep the taxman from taking an undue interest in their profits. He found it hard to blame the struggling small businessmen for trying to keep their profits for themselves, but the garage had clearly been involved in preparing stolen cars to be released back onto the market. The tools to rig up a small van with enough explosive to really ruin someone's day had been easy to find. God alone knew what had happened to the owner and his family. They hadn't returned to work in the days since the invasion.

A tap at the door brought him to full alertness. He half-drew his pistol with one hand as he padded over to the door and peered through the one-way glass that the previous owner had installed. The young fool was standing there, waiting for him. Abdul rolled his eyes, silently grateful that he wouldn't have to rely on such fools forever, knowing that the man wouldn't have bothered to walk in a manner that might deter a shadow. His confidence that God would protect him was grossly misplaced. In Abdul's experience, God helped those who helped themselves — although He probably wouldn't want to help suicide bombers. Part of him wanted to tell the young fool to go home and enjoy the rest of his life, but there was no real alternative. They had to remind the aliens that they existed before the aliens broke their determination to resist.

He opened the door and waved the young man into the garage. The young fool had dressed for the job, all right. He'd washed, cut his beard and then dressed in his finest white robes. If he'd paid as much attention to his schoolwork as he had to his appearance, he might have made something of himself without slipping into bitterness and

paranoid conspiracy theories. Abdul shook hands with him firmly, and then nodded towards the white van. It was ready to leave the building.

"I've been watching the alien guards," he said. Quite why the aliens had bothered to take over a technical college in London was beyond him, but it was clearly important to them. They weren't using their tame policemen to guard it. Instead, there were upwards of thirty aliens on guard duty and they weren't shy about urging human onlookers away from the scene. "You should be able to get into the parking lot if you leave in twenty minutes."

One thing that had been hammered into his head time and time again during the dreaded Combat Infantryman's Course at Catterick Garrison had been that they should never be predicable. Any routine was dangerous because a watching enemy could pick the best moment to launch an attack, catching the defenders by surprise. But the aliens didn't seem to have realised that. Their guards patrolled in regular, easily predicable patterns, changing every hour. He could almost set his watch by their movements. It had taken him two days of observation to be reasonably sure that it wasn't a trap of some kind, although they were definitely going to get more than they bargained for if he was wrong. The van carried enough explosive to be fairly sure of totalling the college when it exploded.

He walked over to the van and opened the door. "When you turn the corner onto the road, push down on the switch there," he said. "That arms the bomb. When you want it to detonate, take your hand off the switch and it'll explode. Don't try to brake once you're around the corner — just drive for the gate as fast as you can."

The young man nodded. He looked confident, at least. Abdul silently pitied him — and his family. It was rare to see a suicide bomber blessed by his family, at least in Britain. Their deaths tended to come as a shock to their friends and relatives, giving them the grief of losing someone while dealing with increasingly pointed questions from the security services. Part of his mind pointed out that such a young fool would find a way to harm himself sooner or later, perhaps lashing out at a member of his family. At least this way his death would count for something. He told himself that, time and time again, but the dirty feeling refused to fade from his mind.

He reached out and touched the young man's sleeve. "You don't have to go through with this," he said, flatly. "If you want to back out…"

"I know what I'm doing," the young man said. Abdul sighed inwardly at his tone. He'd heard it before from young recruits, the kind who needed to be broken down before they could be built up again. But that required dedication and determination — and the

young would-be bomber had neither. “It needs to be done, for what they did to us. You have the video?”

Abdul nodded. He’d used a simple civilian camcorder to record a brief statement, a message to be uploaded onto the internet after the bomb exploded. The young fool would explain why he’d bombed the college, stating that it was in response to the occupied mosques. *He* seemed to believe that the aliens had meant to insult and degrade Islam. Abdul suspected that they simply didn’t care. Given their size, they needed larger buildings — and mosque prayer halls were wide open, easy for them to use. A church would need to have the pews removed before it would suit the aliens.

“It’s ready for uploading,” he said. Actually, he’d moved the uploading laptop somewhere else. He had no way of knowing what surveillance capabilities the aliens had in place, which meant that they might be able to trace the van back to the garage. And if they caught him… he was sure that there were other soldiers operating within London, apart from his small cell, but he hadn’t been given any details. He had to assume that their death meant the end of resistance within London. “Remember; push down on the switch once you turn the corner, and then *keep your hand on the switch*! You let go of it early…”

“Understood,” the young man said. He turned the key and the engine rumbled to life. It was lucky that the garage owner had kept a small reservoir of petrol under the building, or they wouldn’t have been able to fuel the van. Civilians had almost no petrol in London these days. The air was cleaner already. “And thank you.”

Abdul watched him go, silently wondering if God would hear his prayers in the future.

He’d just sent a young man to hell.

* * *

Aashif knew how to drive, but he’d never taken the formal test and he had never tried to drive a van before. It felt heavy and unwieldy compared to his father’s car and if the roads hadn’t been almost empty, he was sure that he would have crashed — or at least scraped off some of the paint — by now. His sweaty hands felt slippery against the wheel, forcing him to keep a tight grip. He could hear his heartbeat pounding inside his skull. A collaborator’s car pulled out ahead of him and he had to push down on the brakes to avoid a collision. He’d been warned that if he did crash, for any reason, he had to abandon the van and run. The moment they saw the explosives, the police would know what he had in mind…

His breath was coming in patches, leaving him feeling unwell as he turned the corner carefully. There were no traffic lights in London these days either. He'd been told that he would feel calm, that the peace of God would overwhelm him, but instead he just felt frantic, almost terrified. It would be easy to park the van and just run… he could walk away from his own death. But there was nowhere to go. The people he knew were the ones he had bragged to about his role in the *Jihad*. It had seemed so easy at the start to use his inflated claims to gain power and influence — God knew that the younger Muslims had had enough of older clerics telling them what to do. Pakistan was on the other side of the world — gone, if some of the more alarming reports on the internet were true — and it wasn't *right* that they should be controlled by village elders who couldn't even protect them from racists or the police…

And then there were the temptations of the West. Women leaving the homes and working for a living, instead of doing their duty as mothers, daughters and wives. Music, drugs… everything that polluted the mind and wore away at faith. And homosexuality… how could anyone tolerate a world where men could love men? It was disgusting how the West prided itself on its own tolerance. Even though it provided a shield for the faithful, for those determined to turn back the clock… how could anyone *stand* to live like that?

And then there were those who suffered while he lived in luxury…

It had been easy to pretend, until his dream had become a nightmare. And yet he couldn't back out. He'd recorded the video, the one where he'd damned the aliens and their collaborators for what they'd done to Islam. If he left the van and ran, he knew what would happen. The video would be released and everyone would laugh at him. He'd know that they were laughing, even as they pretended to be sympathetic. How could he ever show his face in their company again?

His heart beat faster as he turned the corner. The college was just up ahead, a place for smarter kids who didn't want to spend the rest of their lives flipping burgers at McDonalds, or claiming benefits. He reached for the switch and hesitated. It wasn't too late. He could park and run away and maybe find a new home somewhere else. There were always possibilities for those with the determination… but he'd lacked it. In a rare moment of self-assessment, he realised that he'd never had the determination to make something of himself. Instead, someone else had made something out of him. He wanted to run and yet he didn't quite dare…

He pushed down on the switch, hearing an ominous click. His hand felt as if it were drenched in sweat as he gunned the engine,

sending the van forward faster. The aliens hadn't bothered to put up a gate, merely a pair of guards. He saw their ugly forms and pointed the van right at them, wondering if they had the sense to jump out of the way. It wouldn't save them, though. There was enough explosives in the van to reduce the entire building to rubble… or so he'd been told. Maybe they'd lied to him…

There was a popping sound. It took him a moment to realise that they were shooting at him. A burst of pain spread over his chest, sending him flopping backwards against the seat. It was suddenly very hard to think. His chest was warm… blood was pouring from a hole… he slumped forward, his hand falling off the switch. He had a second to realise that he'd released the switch… and then the world went away in a flash of white-hot flame.

Chapter Eighteen

London
United Kingdom, Day 15

Robin and Constable Riley had been parked in a police car when they heard the explosion. It was thunderously loud in a city where most noise had dimmed away to almost nothing. The cars that had once produced a constant backdrop were silent; no massive jumbo jets flew in and out of the city. Indeed, it had been so quiet that Robin had wondered if the penny was ever going to drop. And the massive fireball rising up in the distance suggested that it had. Someone was striking back at the aliens…

"Start the car," he ordered, grabbing his radio. The aliens had allowed them to use them, although Robin suspect that they intended to use them to monitor their collaborators. "This is Zulu Bravo; we are heading to the incident site. I say again, this is…"

"Trouble," Constable Riley commented, as he flung the police car around a corner. "They were doing something at that college…"

Robin stared, not quite believing his eyes. There had once been a large building, home to a technical college producing graduates with degrees that should get them good jobs in the computer industry. It had been smashed by the explosion, along with several other buildings nearby. A number of cars were burning brightly — he keyed his radio to summon the fire brigade — and an alien armoured vehicle had been tipped upside down. It was a weakness in their design, he guessed; their hover-cushion gave an unexpected blast the leverage to throw the vehicle right over. He doubted that it would happen to a human-built tank.

"Dear God," he breathed. There seemed to be hundreds of people caught in the blast. Most schools hadn't reopened in the days following the invasion, but the aliens had been very interested in the technical college. No one had quite been able to figure out why. "How many people did they kill?"

"It really makes you wonder," Riley said, as they climbed out of the car. The whole scene was overwhelming, worse than Buckingham Palace. "Which side are we supposed to be on?"

Robin glared at him. If he'd been alone, if no one else had been in danger, he might have joined one of the resistance cells being talked about on the internet. But there was his wife… and there was the simple fact that innocent civilians were going to be caught in the midst of the fighting. The police existed to protect civilians… which didn't change the fact that they'd effectively started working for the

aliens. But if they hadn't, who knew what the aliens would do in response? If they used live ammunition to respond to broken bottles, what the hell would they do in response to a bomb that had slaughtered upwards of twenty of them?

"Call ambulances," he ordered. He wasn't sure where to begin. With the wounded — or with two bodies that were very clearly not human? The aliens didn't seem to have survived the blast. Maybe they had some wonder-technology that could resurrect the dead, but he wouldn't count on it. "Call medics. Call everyone."

He shook his head. Where the hell did they even *start*?

* * *

Fatima had been trying to relax when her pager went off, alerting her to a medical emergency. It had come just in time. Her stepmother had been boring her again with more suggestions for suitable boys, even though they'd lost touch with the old country. The internet said that India and Pakistan had nuked each other in the wake of the invasion and, despite her best hopes, she suspected that it was true. Too many sources were repeating the same claim time and time again.

She picked up her overnight bag and ran out of the door, glancing down at her pager to see where she was going. A massive plume of smoke was rising up over London, reminding her of the hellish first days when the aliens had arrived. At least they'd managed to get most of the wounded to their own homes, she told herself as she started to run. Five minutes later, she saw an ambulance and flagged it down, hoping that the driver would have time to stop. He did, allowing Fatima to climb onboard before he gunned the engine again, heading towards the plume of smoke. She felt sick as she realised where they were going. Gilmore Technical College had played host to several of her friends, back when they'd dreamed of careers. And now it was just a pile of rubble.

A number of Incident Coordinators had arrived and taken charge, thankfully. They'd been missed during the desperate attempt to treat the wounded in Central London, during the invasion. Fatima didn't even bother to throw them accusing glances — they were collaborators, after all — as she scrambled down from the ambulance and ran towards their position. Police and firemen were helping the wounded away from the fires, trying to get them processed and into the queue for medical treatment. She closed her ears to their screams and pleas, knowing that there was little she could do to help. God alone knew if they had enough medical supplies on hand.

She rapidly found herself assigned to triage. It wasn't something

they'd practiced before, outside of a pair of paranoid exercises they'd done before the invasion. She glanced at the first casualty, swiftly assessed his condition, and marked him down as category two. He had a broken leg and was probably in shock, but he'd survive without immediate medical treatment. It broke her heart to leave him without help, yet there was no choice. The next person, a young girl barely out of her teens, was too badly wounded to live without immediate hospital treatment. Fatima marked her down, knowing that she would probably never be taken to hospital and receive the treatment she needed. At least she was too badly injured to be aware of her surroundings. If God was kind, she would pass away without ever waking up.

The hours seemed like days as they tried to clear up the mess. Over two thousand humans had been in the building when the bomb exploded, along with a number of aliens. Most of them were dead, or so badly wounded that the only thing the doctors could do was inject them with painkillers and watch them slip away. One of the bodies, plonked down in front of her, was clearly inhuman. She forgot her fear and helpless anguish as she stared down at the alien body. The inner bone structure was very different from a human skeleton, as far as she could tell; despite their great size, they seemed almost *weaker* than the average human. But the internet insisted that the aliens had an advantage in hand-to-hand combat… their leathery skin, far tougher than human skin, might help hold them together. Perhaps they were less used to trauma than humans.

A leathery hand pulled her away from the body. She jumped… and found herself staring up into an alien face. The alien pushed her aside with casual ease, allowing two of his — she assumed that it was a male, although there was no way to tell — comrades to pick up the body and cart it away to one of their floating trucks. They weren't bothering to tend to any of the human wounded, or even help moving away the dead. As far as she could tell, they only cared about themselves.

"Don't get angry at them," a soft voice said. She looked up to see a policeman, staring down at her. There was something damned and suffering in his eyes. "Just be grateful they're letting us handle this."

Fatima opened her mouth to deliver an angry retort about collaborators — and then she swallowed it, knowing that it would do no good. What choice did they have? And what choice did *she* have? She had opened herself to charges of collaboration by coming to help the wounded, even though most of the wounded were humans. And to think she'd wondered why Iraqis had had so much trouble deciding which side to support during the war…

She pushed the thought aside and returned to work. There was an

unending stream of casualties to tend to, and hopefully save. And then perhaps she might find something else to do with her time.

* * *

From his vantage point, Alan Beresford watched as the plume of smoke slowly faded away. It had been nearly four hours since the blast and the emergency services had worked like demons to cope with the damage. There was no threat to any other building, at least as far as they could tell, and they had a preliminary list of the dead. And as far as they were concerned, Alan knew, they'd done an excellent job. It was a pity that there was nothing left of the bomber, but the blast had been powerful enough to bring down a fairly large building. The bomber himself would have been reduced to atoms.

But that wasn't the important point, Alan knew. The aliens didn't share details about their security — or their long-term objectives — with him, but he did know that they had taken a handful of losses recently. Small, compared to the casualties they'd suffered during the invasion itself, but irritating. And all the more irritating because they'd trusted Alan to provide security for their people. They'd given him power and responsibility and all they'd asked was that he kept his word. What would happen to him, Alan asked himself, if they decided that they no longer wanted him to control the country for them? Somehow, he had no doubt that the aliens would simply kill him and put an end to it.

The thought was intolerable. He'd risen high in pursuit of power — he wasn't going to let it end without a fight. And if the aliens decided that he was expendable… no, it was unthinkable. He wasn't going to look as ineffective as the British Government had looked against the IRA, or the more recent threat from Muslim fundamentalists. He'd show them that Alan Beresford was still a good investment. And if a few innocents got mashed in the gears, well… one couldn't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs.

He turned and faced his small Cabinet. And small it was. Many of the ministers who'd served Prime Minister Gabriel Burley — wherever the hell he was — were dead, or in hiding. It seemed unlikely that they would be able to remain undiscovered forever, but that was small comfort. He'd had to promote a handful of his cronies, a number of men who owed him favours, and the senior surviving police officer in London. Some of them followed him because they believed in him, others followed because of the dirt he had on them… and at least two were there because they had nowhere else to go. But that could change, Alan reminded himself, savagely. How long would it be before

one of them realised that they could make their own deals with the aliens? And then how long would Alan last?

"We have a problem," he said, addressing his Media Officer. Catherine Stewart knew where the bodies were buried, sometimes literally. Alan had once heard a joke about how many people would attend the funeral of a world-famous columnist, just to make sure that the old bat with the poison pen was finally dead. It applied just as much to Catherine, whose blonde good looks concealed a razor-sharp mind and a complete absence of scruples. "The scrum who did this killed innocent Londoners. They have to be found. I want you to make sure that that party line gets out there right away, without any dissent. Try and prevent the internet from taking any other line."

Catherine nodded. It hadn't taken her more than a week to start building her own empire — but then, she was the only source of employment for countless spin doctors and muckrakers who no longer had anywhere else to go. They'd make damn sure that the media toed the line, or he'd have some of them shot to encourage the others. And he wasn't joking either. Given enough time, he was sure that they could shut down most of the internet in Britain, but it seemed different to do without taking down what remained of the government communications network. The aliens had refused to allow them to use the alien network.

"Of course, sir," she said. "How do you wish us to proceed?"

Alan's temper boiled over. "I expect your fucking subordinates to do their jobs," he snapped. "I want pictures of the dead and wounded — the younger and sexier the better. I want sob stories on who died and how much promise they had in front of them before they were assassinated by the wretched terrorists. I want total media coverage — interviews with the survivors and relatives, talking heads on how some people just cannot forget the past, and tearful interviews demanding that the legitimate government do something about them. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," Catherine said. She lowered her eyes, but Alan wasn't fooled. There was nothing submissive in her nature. "I shall see to it personally."

"Now go do your damned job," Alan snapped, and waited for her to leave the room. She was too smart for her own good, at least in a world he controlled — as long as he pleased the aliens, of course. Given time, he was sure that she would be the one to challenge him. The woman was just too ambitious for her own good. "Chief Constable — give me some good news, *please*."

Chief Constable Gerald Rivers hadn't been Chief Constable for very long. His predecessor and his deputy had been killed when the aliens took out Scotland Yard and Rivers' only real qualification for

the job was that he'd been the senior police officer to agree to serve the aliens and keep the peace. He was a short man, inclining towards stoutness, but there was a hard edge underneath him that Alan had no difficulty recognising. It was a shame that he genuinely believed that the only way to protect the public was to work with the aliens, rather than allowing ambition to drive him forward… Alan shrugged. One couldn't have everything and Rivers wasn't likely to try to unseat him.

"We did manage to repair most of the CCTV network nodes over the last few days," Rivers said. London had had the greatest number of CCTV cameras per person in the world — until the aliens had arrived and wrecked a few hundred when they'd taken out Central London. "I've had crews working on the footage — we did manage to trace the van back to its base. And we got some good pictures of the bomber himself, but we think he had at least one accomplice. The explosives used in the blast were military-grade."

Alan scowled. The Household Division had put up a vicious little fight in Central London — and the aliens had been certain that they hadn't rounded up all of the surviving soldiers. Some of them had been killed trying to get out of London, but others had clearly stayed inside the city — and had been planning to carry on the war against the aliens. He cursed them under his breath, even as he tossed a few ideas around in his head. Perhaps there was a way to escape blame for the disaster… no, the aliens wouldn't be interested in excuses. From what he'd heard, they were only interested in results.

"I assume the bomber blew himself to fuck," he said, flatly. The swearword felt good on his lips, even though he had been careful not to swear in public before allying himself with the aliens. The Leathernecks, as some were calling them. "What about his accomplice?"

"I'm afraid his ally was too careful," Rivers admitted. "Our CCTV coverage near Regents Park has never been what it should be — and whoever was behind the blast knew to stay out of the camera's field of vision. The chances are good that we have some footage of the bomb-maker, but we don't know it. At least, not yet."

He shrugged. "The bomber himself, we believe, was Aashif Shahid," he continued. "He does have a file — he came to our attention after a number of outspoken comments in the mosque about the need to wage war on the Great Satan — but MI5 took a look at him and decided that he was nothing more than a loudmouth. No real contacts with the radicals who could provide explosives or weapons — and no sign that he was trying to build his own. And as for why he decided to attack the aliens…?"

Alan shrugged. "Get a team out to the garage and see if you can pick up any clues that might lead to the bomb-maker," he ordered.

“And then draw up a list of his friends and family. I want them arrested and charged with harbouring a known terrorist…”

“With all due respect, sir,” Rivers pointed out, “there is no evidence that anyone else knew about his plans…”

“Do it anyway,” Alan ordered, sharply. He glanced over at the alien communicator on the table. God alone knew how it worked, but it was quite possible that the aliens were watching him at all times. Fear leaked into his voice as he spoke. “Do you want *them* to do it?”

Rivers met his eyes in shared understanding, if for different reasons. The aliens could do it, all right, or they might bring in the heavy weapons. It was easy to imagine them calling down strikes on London, blasting entire buildings to rubble just to teach the imprudent humans a lesson. And then they’d be looking at thousands dead and God alone knew how many wounded. And it wouldn’t give them a chance to track down the remainder of the resistance cell. And…

“See to it,” Alan ordered, quietly. “We can’t risk losing control now, or we might lose everything.”

Chapter Nineteen

London
United Kingdom, Day 15

From a distance, the old garage looked harmless. Just another old business, struggling to stay afloat in the depression — and perhaps making questionable deals with criminals or terrorists to keep the money rolling in. But Sergeant Terry Graves knew better than to relax. CO19 — the Central Operations Specialist Firearms Command — had broken into terrorist bases before and, no matter how innocent they looked, they often had unpleasant surprises waiting for unwary armed police officers. The irony didn't amuse him as he beckoned the rest of the team forward, leaving two men behind to watch from a safe distance. They'd been sent into battle unarmed, at least without firearms. The alien ban on human firearms was still firmly in place.

Terry cursed silently under his breath as they crept closer. In an ideal world, he and his team would be fighting the aliens — and they'd had time to conceal a small number of firearms around London in places they could reach them if the shit hit the fan. But for the moment, they had no choice, apart from collaboration. And if they failed to catch the insurgents who had struck out at the aliens, the aliens would take steps of their own. Given their willingness to use indiscriminate weapons fire in the midst of the civilian population, he had no doubt just how bloody and violent their steps would be.

He held up a hand as he inspected the garage's door. It was quite possible, judging by the blast that had levelled an entire technical college, that they weren't dealing with would-be terrorists at all. The moron who'd driven the truck could have been told that he would have time to make his escape, or maybe he'd known that he was going to die. And the person behind him, far from being an international terrorist, might be someone trained and armed by the British Army. Terry had seen enough SAS troopers during their cross-training sessions to dread the possibility that one of them might have gone rogue.

The thought made him snort. From what they'd been able to pick up from the internet, the remains of the British military had been ordered to carry on the fight for as long as possible. They weren't chasing a rogue, but someone intent on carrying out his orders and hurting the aliens until he was finally hunted down and killed. There might be an entire team of Regiment soldiers waiting for them, or perhaps they had already vanished, leaving no traces behind. Terry envied them their freedom of action. His own family had been moved

to a place where they were being held — for their own good, of course. And if he turned against the aliens, they would kill his entire family.

They seem to be getting an idea of what makes us tick, he thought, sourly. *God knows how long they were watching us from space. They don't seem to be particularly subtle at all — do as we want or we will kill you. And if you vanish, we will kill your family…*

The garage seemed deserted, but he clutched his baton tightly as he pushed at the door. There was a single click and then the door swung open, revealing a deserted interior. It looked as if someone had been busy — there were tools scattered everywhere — but they had clearly abandoned the building. Judging from the skill shown by the bomb-maker, he'd probably assumed that the suicide bomber would have been caught on camera and traced back to his base. Someone from the Regiment would have known just how the Met used the CCTV network to look backwards in time and try to localise a terrorist base. Or catch bad parkers, for that matter.

He beckoned two other officers inside and they spread out, checking for traps while carefully not touching anything that might carry fingerprints or DNA evidence. The pit below where the van had rested was deeper than he expected, suggesting that the original owner of the garage must have been a very tall man. Or perhaps he'd just been an expert at scrambling out of pits. There was no sign of a ladder or any other way back to the ground floor.

"In here," one of the officers muttered. "I found papers."

Terry followed his gaze. The back of the garage was a small office, stinking of half-eaten kebabs and burgers. Judging from the smell, the food had to have been decomposing for several days, perhaps a week. London's endless series of kebab houses had been shutting down as supplies from outside the city tapered off, leaving the population dependent upon the tasteless alien muck. It struck him as odd that an SAS soldier would leave contaminated food behind, but maybe it was intended to deter intruders. *He* certainly wouldn't have wanted to go into the office without a gas mask and perhaps a flamethrower. The forensic team were going to have to wear full NBC suits if they wanted to pull anything useful out of the room.

"Maybe they left something behind to tell us where they were going," the officer said. Terry doubted it. It was rather more likely that the garage's owner had left the papers behind, wherever he was now. Teams of researchers were already looking through the records to see what had happened to him — maybe he'd registered with the aliens — but Terry wasn't too hopeful that they would lead the Met to the bomb-maker. It was far more likely that it would be nothing more than a wild goose chase. "Or perhaps…"

He opened one of the drawers, a second before Terry could shout out a warning. There was a second click, followed by a wave of fire that blasted out and into the garage. Terry yelled in pain as his skin burned, even as he stumbled backwards trying to find the way out. The flames were spreading with terrifying speed, suggesting that the entire garage had been rigged to catch fire quickly and efficiently. He felt as if he'd caught fire himself… somehow, gasping for breath, he managed to find his way out without falling into the repair pit. Another officer wasn't so lucky; Terry watched in horror as he fell, just before the flames roared into the pit. They seemed to be almost crawling across the ground towards the policemen. He heard a scream that cut off seconds later.

Outside, he could hear the sounds of fire engines already on their way. It was far too late. The flames had consumed much of the evidence, if there had ever been any evidence at all — it was, he realised grimly, a trap intended to kill a number of policemen as well as wipe the slate clean. It was clear that the bomb-maker had a nasty sense of humour.

His skin still burning, he found a place to sit and waited for the fire brigade. Somehow, he was sure that they wouldn't find anything in the ruins of the garage. The bomber had gotten clean away.

* * *

Robin glanced up at his small force of policemen. They were all wearing riot-control gear, which should provide some protection if the situation turned violent. And it might well turn violent — Londoners weren't used to seeing hundreds of people torn from their homes and transferred to detention camps, even during the terrifying days after suicide bombers had struck the London Underground. People might resist — and if they did, it was likely to get bloody. And they'd still been denied firearms. The aliens had promised that they would have a force on standby to help out the police if necessary, but Robin was determined not to call on them. They'd kill civilians indiscriminately in the name of restoring order.

The vans pulled up outside the house and halted. Robin opened the doors and led the way out and up to the door, pressing down hard on the buzzer. A second team had been deployed to the back of the house, where it would snatch up anyone trying to climb out the rear window. There was a brief pause, and then a middle-aged Asian woman opened the door, her dark eyes clearly armed. The police weren't very popular in this part of London, despite attempts to recruit more officers from ethnic minorities. And they were about to become

a great deal less popular…

Robin grabbed her, frisked her with casual efficiency, and then spun her around and slapped on the cuffs. She let out a yelp of shock that became a scream when he shoved her into the arms of another policeman, who would put her out in the garden until they'd rounded up everyone in the house. Her yelp brought two teenage boys out to see what was going on; Robin barked at them to keep their hands where he could see them, just before taking advantage of their shock to handcuff the lead youth. The second tried to swing a punch at Robin, only to be sent falling to his knees when Robin slammed his baton into his chest. He vomited, but Robin had no time to see to his health. As soon as the cuffs were on, he crashed onwards, into the next room. Two younger girls were cooking something that smelt hot and spicy; he gave them a moment to turn off the gas before cuffing both of them and pushing them outside.

Five other policemen had clumped up the stairs, finding three middle-aged gentlemen and an elderly lady who looked old enough to be Robin's great-grandmother. Her ID card claimed that she was sixty. The policemen cuffed her anyway, shouting at the men to keep them subdued as they were hauled downstairs. Robin kicked his way into the suicide bomber's room, but saw little of interest apart from some pamphlets produced by radical fundamentalists calling on the Muslim community to rise up and slaughter the infidel. He picked a new-looking booklet up and glanced at it, realising that the fundamentalist arseholes had demoted America from Great Satan to Middle Satan. The aliens seemed to be the new Great Satan, although he wasn't sure why. He'd heard that some fundamentalists were claiming that the aliens had bombed Mecca, but as far as he'd been able to tell they'd largely ignored the Middle East. The region was sinking into chaos after they'd smashed the military bases and left the rest of the region to sink or swim on its own.

Outside, a crowd was already gathering. The policemen ignored them as the next set of vans pulled up, ready to take the prisoners to the detention camp. Robin shuddered as the prisoners set off an awful racket, yelling and screaming for help from their fellow Muslims — and everyone else in the area. He felt sick at what he was doing — the Nazis had done the same to the Jews, as well as everyone else who'd incurred their hatred — but there was no choice. The looks some of the civilians were giving him suggested that they wouldn't accept his excuses, or his self-justifications. They saw him as a monster serving an inhuman enemy.

But we've no choice, he wanted to shout. *They can kill the entire human race.*

A rock was thrown by one of the crowd, followed rapidly by a

small volley of stones, bricks and bottles. Robin ducked for cover as objects began to bounce off the side of the vans, or strike policemen. They were wearing armour, but no body armour was totally perfect. Two of the policemen fell to the ground, bleeding. One of them was caught up by the advancing mob and stomped to death.

Damn you, Robin thought. *Don't you know what the aliens will do to you*?

He barked an order and the water cannons activated, spraying water over the advancing crowd. They staggered backwards, some of them choking for breath as the hose was played right over their faces. Some of them seemed to have the sense to run, but others seemed far too aware that the police vans could only carry a small amount of water. A few minutes and they'd run out completely. And then they'd be forced to use the gas…

The engines roared to life and he barked orders. They'd have to leave the body of their fallen comrade behind, even though it tore at him to leave it. The only way to recover the body was to use gas — and he wasn't ready to use it unless they were in desperate straits. He watched as the remaining policemen scrambled for the vans, and then beat a hasty retreat. Absently, he wondered how the other teams were coping. The aliens had designated three hundred relatives of the suicide bomber and his friends for capture. Some of them would probably be arrested easily, but the others…? The Islamic community might hide them from the aliens.

He let out a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding as the vans lurched down the empty streets. They'd made it out without having to kill any of the civilians. But next time…

Next time, he was sure, it would be a different story.

* * *

"I strongly suggest that you don't go any further," a man's voice said. "You're already in deep shit."

Fatima jumped. She'd been walking home from the bomb site, lost in her own thoughts — and yet surely someone should not have been able to surprise her. The streets of London weren't safe — hell, they hadn't been safe before the invasion. She had been asked to take up lodgings at one of the hospitals, but she'd declined. There was no way to explain it to her stepmother. Respectable girls lived in the family home until they married, whereupon they moved to their husband's home and found themselves slaving for their mother-in-law.

"Don't worry," the man said. "I'm on your side. Call me Abdul."

"Right," Fatima said. She'd met men who thought that they were

God's gift to women before, brimming with unjustified confidence… but this man seemed to be more relaxed than confident. "What's going on…?"

She glanced around the corner and stopped, dead. There looked to be a small army of policemen outside her house, and a growing crowd of friends, relatives and neighbours surrounding the policemen. As she watched, her stepmother was hauled out by two of the policemen and dumped in the garden, her hands cuffed behind her backs. The rest of her extended family followed moments later. Fatima realised, in growing shock, that she would have been arrested herself if she'd been in the house.

Abdul caught her arm. For once, she wasn't offended at a man touching her without an invitation. "Walk with me," he hissed. She could feel his breath against her ear even though the scarf. "Pretend we're a married couple and walk slowly. We don't want to attract attention."

Behind her, Fatima heard the sound of angry shouting in three different languages and the sound of hosepipes. She felt her heart clench inside her as they walked away, nearly fainting when a row of police vans shot past them and down the road at terrifying speed. The district was normally crammed with cars inching their way through the streets, but now it was empty, allowing the police to move fast. And they were taking her family away… she wanted to scream after them, but what good would it have done?

Abdul looked down at her. Oddly, she felt safe with him. "I'm afraid your… cousin managed to blow himself up earlier this morning," he said. "The police — and the Leathernecks — identified him and marked your family down for retaliation. You're a wanted woman now, I'm afraid. The moment you show that ID card of yours, they'll snatch you up and put you in one of the camps."

Fatima stared at him. "How do you know that?" She demanded. Something else crossed her mind. "And who are you?"

"My name is Abdul," Abdul repeated. "And I'm part of the resistance. And now so are you."

They reached a small apartment block, one that catered to students at London's universities. Some of the students, Fatima had heard, had managed to get permission from the aliens to return home, while others had found themselves trapped in London. It seemed an odd place to hide a resistance cell, but it did make a certain kind of sense. The landlords would be used to people coming and going at all hours of the day and they'd turn a blind eye to certain activities. They walked up two flights of stairs and entered a small suite of rooms, clearly ones that had been abandoned in a hurry. Somehow, she was sure that Abdul himself wasn't a student. He walked more like a

mature and experienced man of the world. The kind of man her cousins had wanted to become.

"But I can't," she protested, finally. Her entire body was shaking. She had to be in shock, she realised. Her entire life had just fallen down around her. God alone knew what would happen to her family. "I can't just leave and… I've got patients to see!"

"The moment you show yourself," Abdul said, kindly, "they will arrest you. There'll probably be a reward on your head before too long. You can't do anything for your patients now — the only thing you can do is get yourself arrested."

He placed one hand on her shoulder. "We have this flat for the next fortnight, at least," he added. "Get a shower, have a long rest — and I'll see you tonight. You're a doctor — the resistance could make use of you. Certainly better use than the aliens could…"

Fatima found her voice. "But what will happen to my family?"

Abdul looked, just for a second, uncharacteristically guilty. "I don't know," he admitted, "but I don't think it will be anything good. It's rather more likely that they will execute them — to encourage the others, as they say. The only thing you can do now is help us to avenge them."

Fatima watched him go, her mind spinning. Her world had turned upside down… and she couldn't even cry. What could she do now?

Chapter Twenty

Near Gayhurst
United Kingdom, Day 20

"I just got the buzz," Private Cole muttered. "The Leathernecks are on their way."

"How unlucky for the Leathernecks," Chris Drake muttered back. The aliens were certainly predicable, all right. It seemed odd that they made mistakes that human armies had learned to avoid, but from what he could tell, they might have good reason to believe that this particular alien routine wasn't dangerous. There were reports suggesting that, two days ago, several men armed with hunting rifles and shotguns had tried to take on an alien convoy. They'd been killed without harming a single alien. "How long do we have?"

"Fifteen minutes, at most," Cole warned. "Maybe less. They do seem to speed up from time to time."

Chris shrugged. The alien hover-tanks moved at speeds that Challenger tanks would have found flatly impossible. Even the smaller armoured vehicles in the British Army — or the barely-armoured Snatch Land Rover — would have had trouble matching their speed. But human trucks and lorries were slower and the aliens, it seemed, were willing to press human drivers into service to help their logistics. It stood to reason that they'd prefer to use human labour where possible, but it didn't seem to have occurred to their commanders that this meant that their convoys were slower than they might have preferred. Or perhaps their commanders simply didn't care. Chris had encountered a couple of senior officers who issued orders that forced the soldiers on the ground to do more with less — and mistook the map for the terrain. And given that the aliens seemed alarmingly inflexible, they probably didn't give their troops on the ground any latitude at all.

Of course, we had to learn, didn't we? He thought to himself. *I wonder if we'll be the lucky ones who run into an alien junior officer with the guts — or family connections — to do his own thing…*?

The M1 motorway was one of the longest motorways in Britain, connecting London to Leeds. It had also been one of the busiest, at least until the aliens had arrived and managed to do what years of protest and campaigning by environmental freaks hadn't. Now, the motorways were almost deserted, used only by the aliens and their collaborators. Indeed, a handful of shot-up cars signified the dangers of using the motorways in a world where armed men were intent on waging war against the occupiers. Most families were conserving what

little petrol they had left for emergencies.

From his vantage point in Gayhurst Wood, he could see the eerily deserted motorway stretching away into the distance. The aliens seemed to be running regular convoys up and down Britain's motorway network, supplying their bases around British cities. In fact, Chris knew that a number of other attacks had been planned over the coming few days, although he hadn't been given any specifics. It was strange to feel as if they were both isolated and connected to the resistance underground, but there was little choice. The aliens would presumably have no qualms about using torture to get information out of prisoners.

But we still don't know what they do to military prisoners, he thought, grimly. The resistance had attempted to trace the prisoners, using assets within the police forces that were serving the aliens, but they'd been unable to come up with any answers. All military personnel had been handed over to the aliens and taken away to an unknown destination. Given that the aliens ruled the entire world, it was quite possible that they'd been taken overseas, perhaps to the Middle East. Or maybe to Antarctica.

He pushed the thought aside as the sensor beside him started to bleep. They might not have any active radars any more, but they could tell when the aliens were using radar — and when one of their drones was heading towards their position. The aliens used drones to provide an outer layer of security for their convoys, a trick that probably explained why they'd picked off the civilian insurgents before they'd had a chance to spring their ambush. This time, however, things were going to be different.

"Get ready," he muttered. The moment they revealed themselves, the aliens would try to cut them down, perhaps by using something like a drone-mounted Hellfire missile. It was astonishing how advanced UAVs had become in the years since 9/11. Even the Taliban hadn't been up to evading their unblinking gaze. "Engage as soon as they come into range."

* * *

Nr'ta Silick studied the live feed from the constantly orbiting drone and relaxed, slightly. The humans were determined opponents, far tougher than anyone else they'd encountered at a comparable technological level, but they clearly didn't realise how easily their movements could be monitored by the Land Forces. A handful of convoys had been hit by concealed explosives and snipers, yet they'd never managed to take on a whole convoy — and never would. Their

failure to develop space like any sane race left a gaping hole in their capabilities, one that a truly advanced race could use against them.

He snorted at the thought. The troopers who'd led the first landings on Earth had warned the reinforcement units that humans were sneaky, but he hadn't seen any evidence of human sneakiness in the four days since he'd landed on Earth. Sure, they'd managed to use treachery to kill many troopers, yet they'd also killed thousands of their own kind. No race, even one as strange as humanity, would carry one like that — their own kind would turn against them. And the humans who drove the trucks were properly loyal. They knew their place — and they also knew that any sign of disloyalty would result in their families being executed.

Earth itself was an odd world. It's climate was rarely perfect, often being too hot or too dry. The rainstorms they'd had just after landing had been refreshing, but they'd really been too cool for proper enjoyment. It wasn't too surprising that the local weather patterns had been screwed up — the Land Forces had bombarded human bases and centres of resistance with KEWs, while the Chinese humans had been insane enough to use nuclear warheads against their own cities — and the weather experts promised that it would get better soon. Indeed, they'd even pointed out that accelerating the greenhouse effect would make the planet warmer, melt the ice caps and generally make it more habitable. He couldn't understand why so many humans seemed concerned about global warming. Didn't they *want* a warmer world?

But the human opinion didn't matter, not now that their world had been absorbed into the State. They would learn to live on the reshaped world or die, while many of their fellows were shipped away to serve the State. And then…

He glanced down at the drone's feed as it shrilled a warning. It was in danger! Someone was using a seeker head to target it… he hesitated, convinced it had to be a malfunction, and then a flash of light in the sky marked the end of drone coverage. And then the world blew up in his face.

* * *

It had been surprisingly easy to gain access to the maintenance tunnels running under the motorway. Indeed, none of the soldiers could *think* why anyone would *want* the tunnels, but they'd come in handy. They'd loaded enough explosive into the tunnels to blow up half the motorway, while lurking in ambush and waiting for the aliens to respond. The destruction of their drone had been the only risky part of the ambush Chris had planned; if the aliens had realised that they

were driving right into a trap, they might have deployed or simply turned back and called for reinforcements. But everything had worked perfectly…

He watched in delight as the lead alien vehicle — a tank, he suspected — literally vanished within the blast. Several human-built lorries were blown to atoms, their cargo picked up and scattered across the motorway. He heard the sound of brakes as the other vehicles struggled to come to a stop, but it was far too late. They crashed into the broken vehicles and caught fire themselves. Two alien vehicles crammed with their soldiers managed to skim to one side and up the embankment, a display of initiative he wouldn't have expected from the Leathernecks. Not that it was going to help them. He'd planned on the assumption that they wouldn't catch any of their escorts with the oversized IED.

"Go," he bellowed. Two Milan antitank missiles leapt towards their targets. One slammed into an alien vehicle before the aliens had a chance to dismount, blowing the vehicle and its passengers into bloody chunks. The other vehicle was luckier, or perhaps its commander had already issued the order to dismount before the aliens realised that they hadn't escaped the trap completely. Half of its passengers were already out when it was hit and sent careering into the motorway. "Hit the bastards!"

He smiled as the two GPMGs opened fire with savage intensity, sweeping the alien positions down below. An alien tank, bringing up the rear, skimmed around and opened fire, although it seemed that they were reluctant to risk coming any closer. Chris couldn't blame them. A Challenger II had been hit with a Milan and hundreds of RPGs in Iraq and survived, but few tankers would have been happy about driving straight up and charging into the teeth of antitank missiles. The alien tank's main gun fired twice, tossing high-explosive shells into the wood. Chris had to admit that it was an effective tactic, assuming that the aliens didn't have any way to localise their enemies. But why weren't they shooting back at the machine guns…

The alien infantry had responded with impressive speed. Most of the survivors had taken cover and were firing back, trying to force the insurgents to keep back from the remains of the convoy. A pair of human bodies on the ground suggested that they'd killed their collaborators, perhaps assuming that one of them had betrayed them to their enemies. Or perhaps they'd been shocked and hadn't realised that the collaborators were their allies. Chris waited long enough to be sure that all the aliens were out and fighting, and then he barked a second order. The three L16 81mm mortars fired as one, tossing high explosive shells down into the teeth of the enemy position. Their cover was effective against bullets, but the mortar shells landed *behind*

their cover, tearing their positions apart. The aliens appeared to be tougher than humans — they certainly had tougher skin — yet they couldn't stand up to mortar shells landing far too close to them. Fire spread through the remaining vehicles as the second round of mortars was fired, just before the mortar teams started breaking down the weapons. They'd been reluctant to leave ahead of the rest when the plan had been drawn up, but Chris had been insistent. Moving a single mortar without a vehicle was difficult — artillerymen were *strong* — and they'd slow the rest of the unit down if they attempted to leave together.

He cursed as the alien tank reversed course and fled, denying him the satisfaction of a complete victory. Seeing it run puzzled him; whatever else one could say about the Leathernecks, they weren't cowards. Perhaps the tank commander had thought better of remaining close to antitank weapons, or perhaps his superiors had decided that it wasn't a good idea to risk losing another tank. It took far too long to produce a human-designed Main Battle Tank. God alone knew how long it took the aliens.

Another series of explosions ran through what remained of the convoy, followed by an uneasy silence, broken only by the sound of fire. Chris barked an order and his men held fire, staring down at the wreckage. Most of them had seen action in Afghanistan, but even the Taliban hadn't been able to wreck so much devastation on a British convoy. The training and equipment of Coalition forces had given them an advantage. He looked down for a long moment, and then nodded to the rest of his platoon. Carefully, weapons at the ready, they headed down towards the convoy.

Up close, there was something eerie about the alien vehicles, something that suggested that their designers worked from different ideas about how the universe worked. Their armour didn't seem to be quite up to human standards, although Chris was uneasily aware that once they ran out of antitank missiles, it was likely to be a great deal harder to inflict losses on the alien vehicles. He glanced inside one and saw a set of charred alien bodies, blackened and burned by the heat. The stench was appalling. He had to fight to keep himself from throwing up his lunch into the alien vehicle.

"Look for prisoners," he bellowed, although he had no hope of finding any. The alien soldiers had been caught by the mortars and shredded. He moved from vehicle to vehicle, glancing inside and shaking his head at the carnage. Judging from the remains of some of the human trucks, they'd been transporting food rather than weapons. He couldn't blame the aliens for being reluctant to arm their collaborators. Who knew when a collaborator might change his mind?

The final vehicle — an alien troop transport — had been tipped

on its side. Most of the aliens inside were clearly dead, but one was alive — if badly wounded. A human wounded so badly would need immediate hospital treatment — he flashed back to waiting on Afghanistan's plains for a medical chopper, knowing that the Taliban would shoot if down if they could — yet he had no idea if the alien could be saved. He met dark expressionless eyes and shivered, studying the alien's wounds as dispassionately as he could. Inky dark blood was leaking out of gashes in the leathery skin and spilling onto the ground. It didn't seem to be congealing like human blood.

"I'm sorry," he told the alien, as he pointed his Browning at the alien's face. It seemed to sigh and bow it's head, an oddly-human motion that tore at his heart. He pulled the trigger once, putting a bullet right through the alien's brains. Oddly, the alien skull seemed to take the shot better than a human skull. He hesitated for a moment, and then scrambled out back onto the motorway. The sound of approaching helicopters could be heard in the distance.

He glanced back at where they'd hidden the IED. There was now a colossal hole in the motorway, leaving a major problem for the aliens to solve if they wanted to continue sending trucks to London. Their own hover-vehicles wouldn't have any problems navigating if they just shoved a small pile of earth into the hole, but any human-designed vehicle would have to be very careful. He scrambled up the embankment, hearing the sound of helicopters approaching from the west growing louder. The enemy tank that had withdrawn from combat — although the statements on the internet would say that it had fled — had clearly summoned reinforcements. He smiled as he saw the two helicopters finally come into view. They were moving slowly, dancing about as if they expected to run right into a trap of their own. Maybe they'd managed to spook an alien commander…

"Time to go," he said. Most of the unit had already bugged out, leaving only his platoon behind. He did have a pair of soldiers with Stingers to cover their retreat if the aliens decided to forget caution and come after them with everything they had. Hopefully it wouldn't be necessary. They had fewer Stingers than he would have liked. "We did good work today."

* * *

Tra'tro The'Stig dismounted from the transport and ran towards what remained of the convoy, hunting for survivors. At first glance, it seemed that there would be none, but orders from his superiors insisted that the effort be made. It didn't take a genius to realise that someone higher up was starting to wonder if there had been too many

casualties on Earth, even though it had only been a handful of days since they'd landed. Given a few months or years, long before the first reports reached the State, they'd have pounded the humans into submission.

Or at least forced them to expend their advanced weapons, he thought, ruefully. This part of the world didn't seem to be as heavily armed as some others. The Russian humans seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of weapons, while the American humans seemed to have scattered weapons everywhere. Some parts of America had been crushed without the need for further fighting, but other parts were too far from the population centres to be brought under their control. At least Britain was small enough that the bases could support each other — although that meant less than it seemed. A planet was *big*.

His radio buzzed. "Report," an insistent voice demanded. The'Stig snorted, quietly enough not to be heard. No doubt it was someone senior enough not to be out on the front lines. "How many survivors have there been?"

"None," he reported, after a moment. There was a long pause, allowing him a chance to spy a couple of human bodies amid the wreckage. He tried to tell himself that they were human insurgents, but it seemed more likely that they were collaborators. The human insurgents seemed determined not to leave their bodies behind. "I cannot find any bodies."

"Understood," the voice said. "Please stand by…"

The'Stig snorted again and started to issue orders to the rest of his unit. They'd scout around and secure the area, maybe pick up on the human trail before they had a chance to go to ground. And then maybe they could extract a little revenge. Maybe…

Because if losing convoys became a habit, they were going to start running short of supplies. And if they had to start using shuttles again, they would risk losing them…

And then their ultimate victory would be in doubt.

And *that* would risk bringing in other powers.

Chapter Twenty-One

London
United Kingdom, Day 21

"How many people are down there?"

"At least five thousand," Gerald Rivers said. The Chief Constable looked uneasy. His policemen were out there, without any weapons more dangerous than water cannons and CS gas. The aliens had forbidden weapons even for those guarding their collaborators. "There will be more when people realise that the aliens aren't going to do anything to stop them."

Alan cursed. Down below, outside the security perimeter he'd had erected around his headquarters, thousands of protesters were gathering. The raids and arrests had galvanised large sections of London, bringing thousands of people out onto the streets. He couldn't help, but remember how crowds had toppled a number of regimes across the Middle East — or how they'd pressured the British Government during the run-up to Iraq. And the crowd below transcended racial or religious borders. The first series of arrests might have been targeted on Islamic families, but the next series had been equal-opportunity repression.

But there was no choice, he told himself, desperately. The poorer parts of London were becoming hotbeds of resistance activity. Young men, men who had had little hope of rising out of poverty before the invasion, were actively targeting the police — and even the aliens themselves. A dozen had died only yesterday in the wake of a failed petrol bomb attack on an alien patrol. And London wasn't even seeing the worst of the violence. Manchester had been consumed by a riot that had torn through Moss Side before the police had finally managed to restore order.

He shivered as the crowd's chant grew louder. As an MP, he'd seen the reports from the security services on radical trouble-makers who enjoyed infiltrating protest marches and causing havoc. A number with ties to London's criminal underworld were down there, arming the protesters with gas masks and even crude weapons. There might even be resistance fighters with the crowd, ready to take out a handful of collaborators. And what would the aliens do, he asked himself, if the crowd broke into his headquarters and lynched him? Perhaps they'd simply sit back and drop rocks on the crowd, thrashing the survivors into submission. Or… there were too many possibilities and none of them were pleasant.

"Give us back our children," the crowd demanded. "Give us back

our wives!"

The roar grew louder as the words spread. It was simple enough to understand; dozens of wives and children, apparently innocent, had been swept up by the raids. No one knew what had happened to them, at least no one outside the alien garrison where Ten Downing Street had once been. Alan knew that they'd been taken outside the city, but then…? The aliens had refused to tell him anything, which suggested that they might simply have been killed.

But that didn't make sense either, he tried to tell himself. What was the point of punitive executions if they didn't inform the country that they'd been carried out? But the aliens were aliens and something that made sense to them might appear strange to the human mindset… he looked down at the crowd again and shuddered. He'd wanted power, hadn't he? And yet he was quailing at the thought of what he would have to do to *keep* hold of that power, to keep the population under control and the aliens happy…

He looked up at Rivers. "Disperse the crowd," he ordered, sharply. "Get rid of them. Now."

* * *

Robin felt sweat trickling down his back as the noise grew louder. The crowd had blurred into a single mass of humanity, screaming and shouting all along the barricades. Robin knew that if they decided to push forward, a lot of people were going to be hurt. Mobs lost all sense of proportion or civilisation; if they caught a policeman, he was likely to be trampled to death. And if individuals wanted to get away from the mob, they would find it very difficult, almost impossible. The mob mentality sucked in individuals and turned them into mindless automatons.

And yet, part of him wanted to throw away his uniform and join them. The mob was right — they *had* arrested hundreds of people without due cause. Sure, some of them had deserved arrest — one firebrand preacher deserved worse, but the pre-invasion government had been reluctant to take the political flak for arresting him — but others were innocent, their only crime being related to the suicide bomber and his friends. And some had been scooped up for no reason that he could see. They'd become worse than the Nazis in a far shorter space of time — and to think that the Met had once prided itself on its ethics. How far were they willing to go to collaborate.

He glanced behind him, seeing the same doubts written on the faces of his fellows. Some of them, at least, had been reluctant to follow orders and even join the police force blocking the way to the

building housing the collaborating government. Others, on the other hand, seemed almost delighted at the prospect of violence, the ones who had learned to hate protest marches during the summers of rage, where it had been politically impossible to hand out the thrashing many of the protesters had deserved. They'd never done a day's work in their life, they'd argued, and yet they deserved to be fed and clothed at taxpayer's expense. Many policemen had little sympathy for protesters. If they put the energy they put into their protests into bettering themselves instead, they would actually find that there were other options than permanently living on the dole.

But they had their orders. The crowd had to be dispersed. Even now, other policemen would be setting up barriers, using them to push the crowd back and block off several lines of retreat. They'd be forced away from the building complex, pushed all the way back to where they'd come from — and any who tried to fight back would be arrested. Or at least that was the plan. Robin knew that many of the protesters would have come armed, intent on picking a fight — or merely intent on preventing a humiliating retreat. And the police had been denied firearms. The protest organisers might be better armed than themselves.

He braced himself as the loudspeaker crackled on. "ATTENTION," the speaker said, loudly enough to be heard over the crowd. "THIS IS AN ILLEGAL GATHERING. YOU ARE ORDERED TO DISPERSE. YOU ARE ORDERED TO DISPERSE."

The crowd started throwing objects towards the police lines. There had been no order, as far as Robin could see, merely a shared desire to hit back at the collaborators. Some of them were throwing rotten fruit and vegetables, others were throwing stones and empty bottles. Those made him wince, remembering the petrol bombs that had been thrown at the aliens had even some policemen. If they'd been filled with petrol and set alight… no flames enveloped the police lines and he allowed himself a moment of relief. A handful of policemen had been injured, but their comrades were already helping them back towards the emergency treatment centre they'd established in the corporate gym. Robin hadn't been able to believe just how many amities they'd managed to fit inside their buildings. It was a wonder that they ever went home for the night.

There was a hiss as water cannons came on, spraying furious gusts of water towards the protestors. The water was drawn from the mains, this time, providing a nearly infinite source of freezing cold liquid. Many protestors, drenched to the bone, would have thought better of being in the protest moments after they'd been hit, but the ones behind them wouldn't let them retreat. The water started to push them back, sending many protesters falling to the ground as they tried

to seek shelter from the water. He allowed himself to hope that they'd succeeded in breaking the protest…

He saw the objects flying through the air before he quite realised what they were, too late. The grenades detonated beside the water cannons, blowing them and their operators apart in brilliant explosions. A great blast of water roared into the sky, leaving drops falling on police and protesters alike… the protesters howled and roared forward like a single living entity. He caught sight of young teenage girls caught up in the crush and felt a moment of pity, until they lunged forward at the police. The policemen fell back as their lines fell apart; it wasn't until he happened to glance towards where the Captain had been that he realised that someone had *shot* him. There was a sniper on one of the surrounding buildings, picking off the police commanders one by one. They hadn't even heard the shot over the sound of angry protesters scenting victory.

"Fall back," Robin yelled. The police lines were wavering. Few had been really enthusiastic about facing the protesters and it was clear that they were losing control. Several policemen with only a few months experience had taken to their heels and fled. "Get back to the second lines, now…"

The mob surged forward and he found himself facing a young man with a shaven head and a pair of knuckledusters. He lashed out with his baton, sending the man crumpling to the ground, before the protesters trampled over his victim and kept coming. It was all he could do to back away slowly, rather than turning and joining the others in flight. He'd never faced such a situation in his entire life. Behind him, he heard the sound of gas being deployed and grasped his mask. He'd had one sniff of the gas during training and that had been quite enough. But somehow he doubted that it would be enough to stop the protesters…

His nerve broke and he turned, running for dear life. The next set of lines might be enough to stop them, or it might fall… and then the protesters would be able to pour into the buildings and rip the core of the collaborator government apart. And then the aliens would have to govern London on their own.

Somehow, he didn't think they would let it get so far.

* * *

"Get everyone up to the helipad," Rivers ordered. Alan barely heard him. The attempt to disperse the protesters had failed badly, not least because someone was clearing their way, picking off police commanders. He found himself looking at the other buildings,

wondering which one held the sniper — or snipers. There might well be more than one. “Sir, we have to evacuate this building.”

As a child, Alan had been frightened of heights and reluctant to enter tall buildings. That old fear came back to him as the building shook, suggesting that the protesters were breaking in through gates that were supposed to be sealed. Perhaps the police had fallen back deliberately, allowing the lynch mob a chance to gain entry and wipe out the collaborator government. He looked over at Rivers, wondering if the Chief Constable had ambitions to take over, before dismissing the thought. Rivers could have turned the police against him without needing to stage a riot.

“Come on, sir,” Rivers said, catching him by the arm and half-dragging him towards the door. The CEO who’d owned the building had placed a helipad on top of the massive skyscraper, allowing him to fly in and out each morning without having to drive through London. Alan’s government had planned to use it to keep certain movements out of the public eye. “We don’t know how long it will be before they get up here.”

Alan nodded, trying to remain dignified. It wasn’t easy. “Where are we going?”

“The only place we can,” Rivers said. “One of the alien garrisons outside the city. And pray to God that they’re not feeling trigger-happy today.”

Outside, on the roof, a gust of wind almost sent Alan to his knees. The entire building was shaking, as if it was on the verge of being blown over. Somehow, with help from Rivers and one of his men, he managed to climb into the helicopter and close his eyes. His entire body was shaking with fear. The sound of the engines grew louder and then he felt the helicopter lurch into life. It seemed to hop into the air, falling back for a heart-stopping moment before settling out and heading away from the building. Alan opened his eyes and stared down at the crowd below.

It struck him, suddenly, that the resistance might have hidden an antiaircraft team nearby, that they might have staged the entire protest to catch him when he was vulnerable. He opened his mouth to insist that they landed at once, before realising that the pilot wouldn’t be able to hear him over the noise of the engines. Instead, he stared out at London, feeling the old fear crawling through his heart. If they were shot down, there would be no hope of survival…

London was burning. He could see plumes of smoke from where rioters were looting shops in the richer part of town, while the crowd of savage humanity seemed to have no end. It was easy to imagine what was going on down there, the frenzy of the lower classes as they worked out their class anger on defenceless targets. And then they

would become savages, looting, raping and burning their way through London. He felt anger pushing away his fear as the helicopter banked away and headed westwards, up towards the alien positions around the city. How *dare* they lift a hand against him?

* * *

Tra'tro The'Stig had to fight down his fear as he dismounted, alarmingly close to the mob of humanity thronging through the area. There were *thousands* of the creatures, yelling and screaming as they raged against their leaders, against the few who had been smart enough to realise that they were beaten. The whole idea of a protest march was alien to those who served the State — surely, even the humans could not be so foolish as to allow protests from their juniors to shape policy. The'Stig, still in command of the mixed remains of several units, felt nothing, but contempt. Didn't these humans have the wit to know when they were beaten? Didn't they know that further resistance would only result in a great many deaths for absolutely nothing?

Behind him, more troop transports and tanks had arrived, bringing a large and powerful force right to the heart of the collaborator government. From what they'd heard through the grapevine — officially, they were only told what they needed to know, as determined by their superior officers — the rioting humans were tearing through the offices owned and operated by the collaborator government. The'Stig wasn't sure what they hoped to achieve. The computer records that detailed all of the registered humans weren't stored with the human government, but outside the cities at the Land Force Base. Even if they burned down the entire area, they would achieve nothing more than irritating the Command Triad. And they weren't even going to get that far.

He hefted his weapon and took aim into the mass of humanity. They seemed to become aware of him at the same moment, changing to lunge towards the troopers and their armoured vehicles. It was absurd. What possible harm could they do to armoured vehicles? Sure, some human antitank weapons could inflict harm on the tanks, but they had none. The only weapons they had were sticks and stones, which might harm the troopers on the ground, yet they wouldn't be enough to win. If they were smart, they would have realised that they were beaten and surrendered.

The machine guns mounted on the tanks opened fire, directly into the mob. Bright red blood seemed to splash everywhere as the bullets, designed to punch through thicker skin than humanity's, tore through

the mass of humanity. He saw human bodies disintegrate under the assault, coming apart and falling in a sickening pile of flesh. It wasn't war, but a bloody slaughter. In seconds, hundreds of humans had been killed. The few survivors were screaming in pain, abandoned by the few who were able to run for their lives. The'Stig winced as the orders to advance came in through his headpiece, sending him forward. His feet seemed to slip on the blood-stained pavement, blood splashing everywhere. The handful of wounded humans were too badly injured to help, even if the Land Force had been inclined to assist humans too stupid to know not to charge tanks with sticks and stones.

Bit by bit, they cleared the human mob away. Panic was settling in, with thousands of humans running for their lives, abandoning others to the tender mercy of the advancing forces. He saw a handful of policemen, wearing the uniforms they'd been told to respect, staring at the troopers, their faces pale with horror. Hadn't they realised what was going to happen? The'Stig slipped on another patch of blood and stared down at the young human who had lost his upper body. A life had been wasted when he'd chosen to join a futile and pointless protest march.

He snorted in disdain. And it had all been so futile. Didn't the humans have the sense to know when they were beaten? He couldn't feel proud of what they'd done. They hadn't fired on the deadly humans, the ones who had been ambushing convoys and sniping at Land Force Bases. Instead, they'd killed thousands of humans who might have been useful, if they'd had some sense knocked into their heads instead of simply being slaughtered. The State would understand what they'd done, but would others? Even he didn't want to go through it again.

His radio buzzed. "Clear the plaza," the order came from above. "We're bringing in prisoners to clear away the bodies. Others will dig a pit outside the city where they can be dumped."

The'Stig snorted, again. Higher authority seemed stunned too. Who knew? Perhaps they would be so stunned that they'd change their tactics. Stranger things had happened.

Chapter Twenty-Two

North England
United Kingdom, Day 25

"We can't go on like this!"

Gabriel couldn't face the television set. For the last four days, the BBC had been broadcasting images from the riot in London — and its bloody end. Alien tanks firing directly into the crowd, alien soldiers crushing human skulls under their armoured feet, hundreds of orange-suited prisoners clearing away the bodies and piling them into trucks, the bodies being dumped into massive pits outside the city… the images were firmly burned into his mind. Nothing in Britain's history, at least that he could recall, matched the sheer horror the aliens had unleashed. God alone knew how many humans had been killed in the riot. The BBC claimed that *no* aliens had been killed, or even injured.

The news had shocked the country. From what few reports Gabriel believed from the BBC, there had been other riots in Newcastle, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Birmingham. The aliens, however, had managed to cow most of the rioters; their soldiers had quelled the other riots by their mere presence. Most of the insurgency had slipped back to IEDs and attacks on collaborators and alien patrols, although much of it seemed to be random violence. It helped that almost all human communities had a common enemy in the Leathernecks. Violent groups that ran the political spectrum from neo-Nazis to Islamic fundamentalists and ecological pressure groups were actually working together to bleed the aliens.

But the country was bleeding too. The BBC was heavily censored these days, controlled by the collaborator government, but enough was leaking through to worry Gabriel. People were starving, families had been shattered… each disaster might have been tiny, on a planetary scale, but they added up to untold misery. Britain wasn't supposed to be like that, he told himself, even during the Blitz they'd been spared the suffering inflicted on continental Europe by the Nazis. Britons saw disasters on television and donated money to help the dispossessed. They didn't suffer disasters themselves. He'd once read a book where an extinct volcano in Edinburgh had come back to life, forcing British emergency services to cope with the disaster. They hadn't done a very good job.

He sat back in his chair, trying to think. How could they convince the aliens to leave? But the aliens only seemed to respect force — and the entire human race hadn't been able to convince them to back off. Barely a month ago, the United States had been so far ahead of the

rest of the world that it could do almost anything it liked. It was now invaded and occupied, the massive aircraft carriers that had given the Royal Navy fits of envy sunk by rocks dropped from orbit. Russia and China had been crushed, the Chinese suffering the effects of their own nuclear weapons as well as alien KEW strikes. And Europe…

The latest reports, such as they were, suggested that Europe was suffering from famine. France and Germany, the two powerhouses of the European Union, had been crippled, the continent-wide distribution network for food breaking down under the pressure of the alien offensive. Eastern Europe had attracted less attention from the aliens, with the result that millions of refugees were thronging through the countryside, desperately seeking a safety that no longer existed. The war in Bosnia had restarted, with a dozen different groups trying to exterminate their enemies before the aliens decided to intervene. But why *would* the aliens bother to intervene? Their human enemies were killing themselves off nicely.

And all he could do was sit and watch as his country was taken apart. He stared around the library, at the old books lovingly collected by the library's owner, and cursed himself for his weakness. His position as Prime Minister was meaningless in all, but name. Even if he were to issue orders, it was uncertain how many people would even hear them, let alone obey. The resistance seemed to be held together very loosely, if at all. He'd been assured that it was the only way to prevent the aliens from uncovering them all if they captured men from one particular cell, but it still felt flimsy to him. How long would it be before the resistance became nothing more than bandits?

A month. That was all it had been — and it felt as if he had been cooped up in his gilded cage forever. He thought, briefly, about the soldiers on the outside, providing security for his august person… did they feel resentment or relief that they were out of the fight? And how long would they *stay* out of the fight? The collaborators had offered a hefty reward for anyone who brought them Gabriel's head, preferably not attached to his body. He wasn't blind to the advantages the aliens would gain from having the legitimate Prime Minister as a collaborator, although he suspected that they wouldn't find him as useful as they would have expected. The slaughter in London would have destroyed whatever legitimacy the collaborator government had once enjoyed.

But what could they *do*? The aliens held control over the high orbitals — if worst came to worst, they could pull out of London — or any other city — and drop rocks on it from orbit. He thrilled to the stories of ambushes and IEDs planted in positions where the aliens would run over them, but they could never force the aliens to retreat and abandon Earth. And what would happen if the aliens decided to

simply exterminate the human race altogether?

Alone in the library, Gabriel continued to worry. He wanted to do something, to take a stand, but what could he do? His only contribution to the resistance was a second video, one condemning the aliens for the slaughter in London and calling on all loyal British citizens to join the fight. And how many of them would hear him and die because they'd listened to a Prime Minister skulking in a hole?

But what else could he do?

* * *

"There's a great deal about this we don't understand," Linux said. Brigadier Gavin Lightbridge-Stewart — who was, as far as he knew, the senior surviving British military officer — nodded. Computers might have been extremely useful, but he didn't pretend to understand what went on inside them. "But the alien computer network is actually surprisingly primitive."

Gavin gave him what he hoped was an encouraging look. Linux — and his friends — hadn't joined the army in the traditional manner, let alone worked their way through the Combat Infantryman's Course at Catterick. They'd been computer hackers who'd gotten their kicks by breaking into secure databases, at least until they'd been caught and offered a blunt choice between working for the government or spending a number of years in jail. They did have some sense of social responsibility, yet they had no sense at all of military etiquette. It was sometimes refreshing to chat to them, but not now. The entire country was under enemy occupation.

"It seemed so odd that we were convinced they were screwing with our minds," Linux continued, cheerfully. "They can travel faster-than-light, their starships are several kilometres long and they clearly have at least some form of antigravity system — their shuttles couldn't fly without something along those lines. And yet they are oddly primitive in some areas. Their precision weapons aren't very precise and their computer networks are surprisingly crude."

Gavin nodded, although he had his own theories about alien precision weapons. From what they could see, the aliens seemed less inclined to worry about accidentally hitting their own troopers as well as enemy positions — and they showed a frightening lack of concern for civilian casualties. If they hadn't had the political impetus to design smarter and smarter weapons, maybe they simply hadn't bothered. Besides, the aliens didn't seem to bother with inventing justifications for their invasion of Earth. They'd come, they'd seen — and they'd invaded.

"They do have wireless networks comparable to our own, but their security technology is several generations behind ours," Linux continued. Two SAS men had slipped close to a major alien base to establish a passive listening post linked directly to the resistance's computer geek headquarters. They'd been monitoring alien traffic ever since. "One thing we can confirm is that the aliens are definitely top-down commanders. Orders flow down from the starships or the command base in London and the poor grunts on the ground do as they're told."

He grinned. "It took a week to find a way to slip *into* their networks, but we're finally starting to pull files out from their systems for examination elsewhere," he added. "We stumbled across another puzzle almost at once. Our translation software isn't very good, but theirs seems to be better than ours — even though their computers are less capable. But it isn't as good as it could be."

Gavin frowned, considering the puzzle. The aliens hadn't done much with the civilian population, but one thing they had done was take over a number of computer-related colleges and research labs. If the alien computers were primitive, maybe they were intent on absorbing human technology into their own society. But why were they primitive in the first place? Gavin could accept that they wouldn't be so concerned with producing precision weapons, yet why didn't they have superior computers? They certainly should have possessed computers equal to mankind's best designs.

"One of the programs we pulled out and studied was definitely designed for English," Linux informed him. "The others, however, aren't for any recognisable language. You'd think they could speak French or Russian or Chinese, but they don't seem to have programs for those translations. I assume that they might not bother to outfit a force landing in Britain with such systems, yet it's an odd oversight…"

"Very odd," Gavin agreed. It struck him a moment later. "There are other aliens out there!"

"So it would seem," Linux said. "At least six, unless the translation programs are for other Leatherneck languages. We have different languages on Earth — why shouldn't they have something comparable on their worlds. Unfortunately, we were unable to locate any files on the other alien races. But we're still looking. I'm afraid they didn't bother to design any search engines for their computer networks."

"Or maybe you haven't found those yet," Gavin said. "Tell me something. Can you alter their files? Twist the data they're gathering on our people? Slip records into the registries…?"

"I don't think so," Linux admitted. "I told you the system was crude — well, it's very crudeness provides some protection from

people like me. We can read the files — hell, we've managed to download terabytes of data we can study without having to remain linked to their network — but altering them would certainly be noticed. Their core memory systems are ROM — ah, Read Only Memory. We can't change them without physical access to the system."

"Which we're not likely to get," Gavin agreed. He patted the young man on the back. "Good work."

"The intelligence staff are working their way through the dump," Linux added. "They're finding it slow going — if there is a listing or filing system, it isn't one that we recognise. It used to be possible to lose files inside computer networks unless one happened to know its precise location. I have a feeling that their superior officers probably have their own files concealed from everyone else. Who knows? Maybe they all gather dirt on their fellows for advancement."

"I was hoping you'd be able to tell me more about their society," Gavin admitted. "I don't suppose you pulled something like Wikipedia out of their database?"

"I don't think they'd want Wikipedia if they could support it," Linux said. "Or Google, for that matter. Or any of the other computer programs that put power in the hands of the users, rather than systems administrators and the big corporations…"

"I think they have more problems right now," Gavin said, dryly. He had a relative who had worked for Google Ireland. The Leathernecks had largely ignored Ireland, apart from bombarding its military bases and destroying the fragile truce between Ireland's various factions. After the remaining British soldiers had been pulled out, Ireland had degenerated into fighting between different factions, with thousands of refugees trying to make it to Britain. Perhaps the aliens would intervene if they thought there was something in Ireland worth taking. Or maybe they had too many other problems on their hands. "What can we do with the access we have? And can they block us out if they realise that we've hacked their systems?"

"I rather doubt they can block us unless they're willing to cripple their networks," Linux said. "But if they do have enemies out there, they may have security tricks we haven't seen ourselves. Maybe their enemies have a cunning plan to hijack their wireless computer networks and render their fleets helpless. And then sexy androids will rule the galaxy."

He saw Gavin's face and cleared his throat. "Sorry, anyway… we may be able to piggyback on their network to send messages to our own people," he added. "And seeing that they all radiate wireless signals, we could probably start tracking their movements. Or… we could rig up a sensor and link it to an IED. When the signals reach the

right intensity, they trigger the IED and it explodes in their face. Or…"

Gavin held up a hand. "Good thinking," he said. "Let me know if there's anything else we can do…"

Linux hesitated. "It *might* be possible for us to interfere with the network," he said. "We might be capable of taking it down completely for short periods of time, cutting their small detachments off from higher authority. The result would be absolute chaos… but they'd know what we'd done. God alone knows how they'd react."

"I see," Gavin said. "I'll have to give that some thought."

He scowled. After the slaughter in London, they needed to find a way to hit back at the aliens, one that would convince them that slaughtering humans would draw a massive response. But how could they do that without revealing what few aces they had in their hand? And what if the aliens decided to destroy the entire human race in response?

* * *

"Panda Cola," the logistics officer said. He tossed a can at Chris, who caught it neatly and scowled down at the label. "All kept nice and cool for our gallant fighting men."

"Piss off," Chris said. Panda Cola was included in the British Army's Horror Bags — the packed lunches that were served to soldiers on duty. It was generally believed that it was produced by forcing a Panda to drink ordinary Coke, then bottling their urine and passing the cans to soldiers, who would then have to drink the foul liquid. Chris had heard during his training that the Ministry of Defence allocated 47p to procuring each can of Panda Cola, which raised the question of precisely what happened to the remaining 42p. "You'd think we could get better rations now we're living off the land."

He scowled around the resistance base. Calling it a base was really too much; they'd built shelters under the trees, trenches just in case the aliens stumbled over their position and a latrine some distance from the sleeping rolls. Some units, he'd heard, were living in civilian homes, but the aliens were getting better at running random patrols through seemingly-deserted hamlets. The base was safer, apart from the possibility of poisoning themselves by drinking army-issue Coke. He opened the can, braced himself and took a swallow. It tasted just as bad as he remembered.

"At least we're eating rabbits," one of the other soldiers pointed out. It was true; hunting skills they'd been taught were actually coming in handy. The woodland was full of small animals and vegetation that could be eaten, although they were being very careful

with the mushrooms. If one of the soldiers managed to poison themselves, they wouldn't be able to get them proper treatment. "We could be eating that foul muck they served us in Edinburgh."

"I told you that you should have taken the pizza," his friend pointed out. Chris felt a pang for the comrades he'd lost in London. They'd all been jammed together from various units that hadn't made it out intact, but some of them had known each other beforehand. "When has the Army ever fed us well?"

Chris snorted. The Army Chefs — the Ration Assassins — had the hardest training course in the British Army. It had to be — no one had ever actually managed to pass, or so the soldiers joked amongst themselves. Now, he almost missed them, even though fresh rabbit stew was surprisingly tasty. Despite himself, he found himself wondering how they were going to cope when winter finally came along. It would be much harder to find food then — and the aliens, the crafty buggers, were being careful about what they doled out to the civilians. It would be easy to see if certain civilians were eating more than they should.

He pushed the thought aside, remembering the horror stories that had floated up from London. They'd have to make the aliens pay for that, but how? It had to be something spectacular… absently, he remembered the interior of the alien vehicles. Humans probably couldn't drive them without major effort. But they did have collaborators driving their vehicles…

Slowly, a plan started to come together in his mind. It would be risky as hell, but they were used to that by now. And they might just have a chance to inflict major damage on an alien base. Perhaps they could even shatter the ring of steel around London.

Absently, he reached for a notepad and started jotting down ideas. The pad would have to be destroyed, of course, but by then he should have a solid concept. They'd have to link up with other units. They couldn't do it alone. He smiled to himself. It would be good to know that they weren't alone.

And the aliens were in for a very unpleasant surprise.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Command Base
United Kingdom, Day 27

By long tradition, each separate Land Forces Commander was expected to remain within his Area of Responsibility until relieved of command. The Command Triad, on the other hand, was supposed to remain on their starships, a legacy of the time when a primitive race managed to kill the Command Triad in charge of subduing their world and wreck havoc while their subordinates were still bickering over who was in command. No one seriously expected other powers to send starships to Earth, while humanity had no ability to reach the command starships in orbit. The Command Triad were therefore isolated from the dangers on Earth.

Ju'tro Oheghizh watched as the teleconference slowly came into being. Each of the Land Force Commanders would link into the conference from their bases on the ground, while the Command Triad would attend from orbit. Given what they'd uncovered about human computer systems, it seemed likely that the whole process would be improved in the next few years, once the human technology was understood and integrated into the State. The humans seemed largely unaware of the potential of their own technology, but no one could deny their skill. They would make a very useful client race in the coming decades, serving as soldiers, technicians and inventors. The State would grow far more powerful.

"It has been one local month since we established ourselves on Earth," *Tul'ma* Jophuzu said. The Land Forces Commander had taken the lead, as was right and proper. His formations were the ones mainly engaged on Earth. "The humans have proved a more capable foe than we expected, but we have successfully taken and kept vast swaths of their territory."

The display lit up on his command. There were enclaves on both sides of the American continent, smaller enslaves across Europe, Russia and Australia — and enslaves scattered over Britain. Oheghizh allowed himself an interior sneer. His command might be smaller than the enclaves in America or Europe, but it was far more promising in the long run. Besides, the American humans seemed to keep fighting even when the situation was hopeless. They even seemed to have two guns per adult human. The only other place that had put up such a fight was Switzerland and the mountainous country had been bombarded into submission after the first landings had been repulsed with heavy losses. It would be a long time before they recovered. If

only because no one was interested in helping them.

"The plans for the final disposition of their military personnel are already under way," the Land Forces Commander continued. "They will serve us on other worlds — and be kept separate from wild humans who could learn from their skills. However, our other plans to use Earth as a source of knowledge and technology have been crippled."

Oheghizh kept his face blank and his body still, refusing to show any emotion. He'd hoped to push forward the schedule for assimilating human technology into the State, but his dreams had vanished when the human suicide bomber — a tactic that made little sense to him — had destroyed the technical college. There were others, of course, but now he had to divert resources to protect the human computer experts and their families — which risked allowing the humans a chance to deduce one of the State's weaknesses. The humans had more experience in using their technology than the State. They had probably invented thousands of different ways to use computers as weapons.

Va'tro Nak'tak spoke from his position. "We may have misunderstood human social psychology," he said. "Humans are a contradictory bunch. Some humans will see us as terrifying and will submit to us without hesitation. Their fear, however, will make them less useful than we might have hoped. Some humans will refuse to allow us to cow them and will continue the fight, at least until they are killed in combat. We cannot expect any form of submission from them — and we couldn't trust it if we got it. Some humans will just try to live their lives as if we didn't exist, doing whatever it took to survive. We have been unable to put together any explanation for their psychology.

"Unfortunately, it seems that humans are often contemptuous of those who see sense and choose to submit to superior force. The humans who agree to work with us, of their own free will, are hated by their fellow humans and often targeted by them. We have seen collaborators attacked in many different countries, suggesting that the disdain for submission is a common human trait. They seem far more understanding of those we force into collaboration — by holding their families hostage — but there are fine lines that we do not understand. Rather than work towards securing themselves positions within the State, humans will continually lash out at the State.

"Worse, a number of the collaborators are considered… *deviant* by human standards. Some of them have sexual tastes for young humans who have not yet reached sexual maturity, tastes which we have allowed them to indulge. The vast majority of humans, however, regard the protection of children as a duty and recoil in horror at

what we have permitted to occur. This horror has certainly fuelled many attacks on us."

Oheghizh snorted, along with many others. The idea of a race that seemed to be permanently in mating season wasn't new, but the humans took it to extremes. It wasn't too surprising that they'd drawn up sexual customs that looked strange to alien eyes, or that those who defied those customs were hated by their peers. But they made little sense. Among the Eridian, a female who entered mating season would be considered sexually mature — and outside mating season, there would be no sexual contact between males and females. The children of the mating, assuming that one took place, would be raised by the females. There were few permanent sexual bonds between male and female — but they certainly existed among the humans. Many of the humans who had launched suicidal attacks had claimed to be acting in the name of a dead mate.

"In the long term, we expect that the humans will eventually be ground under and reshaped into proper servants of the State," *Va'tro* Nak'tak said. "However, we may always have to make allowances for their alien natures. The State may have to devise new rules for them."

There was a pause. "The human sexual nature rears its head whenever male and female humans are put together. It even appears when some humans have a sexual attraction to their own sex, something unknown among us, but very common to the Paklet. Indeed, some human sects appear to consider females useless for anything other than breeding more humans, even though it is clearly inaccurate. The Paklet, however, do not have intelligent males. Their emotional connections are forged with other females.

"For humanity, we will need to create new rules. We have already started segregating humans in our detention camps by sex. It is quite likely that we will have to rein in our collaborators, if only to prevent us being tarred by the same brush — as the humans would put it…"

Tul'ma Jophuzu snorted. "We can make concessions to their nature once they have submitted," he said, flatly. "We have crushed their defences and raid where we will, yet they do not submit in large numbers. How do we force them to submit?"

"In the long term, they will submit," *Va'tro* Nak'tak said, flatly. "We must simply continue to hold our ground and refuse to abandon territory on Earth. They need to be constantly reminded that all of their attacks have not forced us to withdraw — and that we will never withdraw. They'll submit in the long run."

"The longer we wage war on this planet, the greater the chance that one of the other powers will intervene," *A'tar* Esuxam said. The Space Forces Commander lifted one clawed hand to stroke his leathery chin. "We may have claimed this system by right of conquest, but we

don't have the firepower to keep a raiding force out if they wanted to hit us — or the coverage to prevent them slipping help to the humans on the surface. And if they realise what a treasure trove we've found here, they will be very tempted to intervene."

Oheghizh couldn't disagree. Humanity *was* a treasure trove, even if some of their decisions made little sense to a properly rational race. Their imaginations suggested all kinds of interesting weapons and tactics — and their computers would go a long way towards evening the balance between the State and several of its peer powers. Those powers wouldn't hesitate to intervene on Earth if they realised the danger — and the humans would certainly seek to make deals with them if they could. The enemy of my enemy, they said, is my friend.

"We need to tighten our grip on their planet," *Tul'ma* Jophuzu said. "I want all resistance crushed before they have a chance to find help from outside the system."

That, Oheghizh thought in the privacy of his own head, would be easier said than done. Humanity just didn't respond like a rational race, which raised the question of how they'd ever managed to develop atomic weapons without blowing themselves and their world into radioactive debris. Some of the observers had seen human claims of alien contact and wondered if someone might have been covertly assisting humanity's development, but the starships hadn't picked up any signs that anyone else might have visited the system. But how else could one explain a development that defied all of the understood rules?

They're alien, he reminded himself. *They might play by different rules*.

* * *

The Land Force Base near the human city of London was immense. It had been built on top of a human air force base, once the ground had been swept for hidden surprises, and simply expanded outwards. Three fences prevented human insurgents from getting into the base itself, while the outer edge was patrolled regularly by elite infantry units. A series of drones floated high overhead, backed up by attack helicopters and strike fighters. It should have been impregnable.

Tra'tro The'Stig walked across the human runway and up to the prefabricated building. Two guards checked his identity before allowing him to proceed, even though no human could have disguised himself to look like an Eridiani. The very thought was absurd, but the humans were full of nasty surprises. It was better to be paranoid than

dead.

The interior of the building felt pleasantly warm and damp to his skin, a change from the cold breezes outside. There were parts of Britain where it never seemed to stop raining, but the rain was always cold and uncomfortable. Even the humans seemed to find it unpleasant, which didn't stop them from using the rain to cover their movements. The interior was also large enough for him to move freely, without needing to worry about holes torn in human walls or tiny humans lurking in holes too small for an adult Eridiani. It was definitely better than staying in one of the human buildings that had been adapted for their purposes. He saw a pair of females and concealed a wry smile. The seniors were making sure that they were in the right place when the females entered their mating seasons. If he'd smelt the scent that marked a female in heat, he would have fought any other male — superior or not — who tried to prevent him from mating with her. Outside mating season, it was a matter of amusement rather than irritation.

He stepped into the office and thumped his chest with one hand, claws sheathed. *Ju'tro* Oheghizh was far superior to his lowly position, which made the summons rather more than a bit worrying. He hadn't done anything wrong, as far as he knew, but it wasn't always necessary to screw up before being raked over the coals. And yet… he had found himself in command of a scratch Assault Unit made from the remains of several other Assault Units that had been ripped apart by the humans. Had he exceeded his authority badly enough to warrant punishment?

The State demanded nothing, but obedience from low-ranking officers and males. In the privacy of his own head, *Tra'tro* The'Stig wondered if that was the best way to handle fighting a war. It took time to call for orders from higher authority, time that the humans used to good advantage. How many human insurgents had escaped death because the KEW bombardments had to be ordered by superior officers, rather than the ones on the ground? But if he'd vocalised any of those thoughts… the best outcome would be remaining forever frozen at his current rank. At worst, he would be sent to a punishment unit or a re-education camp.

He waited for his superior to speak, as was proper. "You have served well during the course of the invasion," *Ju'tro* Oheghizh said. His superior officer didn't seem angry. "You fought well and survived the experience."

The'Stig wondered, just for a moment, if he was being mocked. Yes, he'd survived — and he'd learned never to take anything for granted. The humans had plenty of skill at concealing IEDs in apparently harmless positions, while they were learning how to hurt

unwary Assault Units with simpler weapons and tactics. Officers fresh from suspension on the starships, assuming that the war was already over because the human cities had been occupied and their militaries hammered from orbit, had been caught by surprise. Many of them hadn't survived their first encounter with human insurgents.

"You are promoted to *U'tra*," *Ju'tro* Oheghizh said, almost casually. The'Stig forgot himself and stared at his commanding officer. He was being jumped up two grades…? It had to be a mistake. But then, hadn't he been serving as an *U'tra* even without the rank? "You will take command of the reformed Assault Units and commence sweeps for enemy insurgents. I expect you to find them and destroy them. Do you understand me?"

The'Stig saluted, hastily. Yes, he understood all right. The reformed units wouldn't be neat and orderly, certainly not as orderly as a more conventional commander would have expected. And if he failed in his mission, he could be demoted just as easily. He almost started to laugh at himself. Hadn't he been sure that he could do better, if he'd been in command? And now he *was* in command. Failure wasn't an option.

"I understand," he said. "I will not fail the State."

* * *

The alien helicopter touched down in the centre of their base and one of his guards half-pushed Alan Beresford towards the hatch. He scrambled out with as much dignity as he could muster, unable to prevent himself from staring at the massive shuttles and other aircraft scattered over the base. The alien buildings seemed dauntingly large, as if they'd been put together by designers without a sense of proportion. He winced at the sound of a jumbo jet coming into land, wondering if it was being piloted by humans or aliens. It seemed unlikely that aliens could fly a human craft, but they'd have to be insane to allow humans to land on their bases. 9/11 had proved just how much damage a crashing jumbo jet could do.

His escort marched him up to one of the alien buildings and into a network of corridors that looked large enough to hold hundreds of aliens at once. The smell was all around him, a scent that reminded him of mucking out a barn on his grandfather's estate. He'd never realised that the aliens smelled before, but then he'd never been in a building that had housed so many of them at one time. Human buildings probably smelled rank to them too.

He shuddered as they pulled him through a door and into an office. The aliens couldn't have been very happy with the recent riots

in London, or the fact that part of the city had become a no-go area for the police. Their system for controlling the city — and the human population — was breaking down sharply. God alone knew how they planned to respond. He looked up at the oversized desk and saw one of the aliens crouching behind it. They didn't seem to need chairs, unlike humanity. Or perhaps it was a way to tell him that he wasn't important to them any longer.

"Your people have proved most disruptive," the alien said. Was it the one he normally dealt with, or was it another one? There was no way to easily tell them apart. "We are not pleased. We will be launching sweeps to catch human insurgents and we expect you and your people to cooperate fully with us. Failure to cooperate will have the most disastrous consequences."

Alan didn't need to be a politician to realise that that was a threat. "I will be honoured to cooperate," he said, quickly. "Perhaps if you could outline what you wish us to do…"

"We will carry out the sweeps without your assistance," the alien informed him. "We wish you to round up a number of humans and their families. We have a use for them."

"But of course," Alan said. There was no point in refusing now. The aliens would simply kill him and move on to another collaborator. "Might I enquire as to the purpose you have in mind for them…?"

"You will do as you are told," the alien said, flatly. "If you are incapable of carrying out your orders, we will find someone who is more capable."

Alan hesitated. If he started rounding people up without explanation, there would be resistance. People would start thinking that the aliens intended to *eat* them or something equally stupid, which would naturally provoke more resistance. And then his police force, already demoralised, would find itself unable to proceed further. But how could he explain that to the aliens?

"I will carry out your orders," he said, finally. "I await your command."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Near Dereham
United Kingdom, Day 32

Alex lay on her belly and considered the town below her. The aliens had arrived in force, coming up at Dereham from Norwich and surrounding the town before anyone quite realised that they were there. Dereham had been ignored by the aliens after the population had been registered, leaving the people to try to get on with their own lives in a world turned upside down, perhaps even to pretend that the world hadn't really changed. Their delusion, if they'd indulged themselves, had come to an end. The town was surrounded and the aliens were moving in.

"We can't just stay here and do nothing," Henry hissed. He was too young — but then, there had been younger soldiers fighting and dying in Afghanistan. "What are they going to do to the people down there?"

Alex shrugged. The aliens had been alarmingly active over the last few days, sweeping through parts of the countryside without anything that looked like a clear plan of action. Alex's best guess was that they were looking for insurgents — the internet noted hundreds of attacks carried out against the aliens — but she wasn't sure why they had returned to Dereham, or why they hadn't attempted to track her down. Perhaps they were following a doctrine formed on another world. Or perhaps they believed that there was a centre of resistance in the town and they intended to destroy it. There was no way to know.

"We can't do anything, but get ourselves killed if we go charging into the town," she hissed back. They'd carried out three strikes at the aliens so far, but she'd insisted on being very careful. If the aliens had decided to sweep through the area for insurgents, it was possible that they'd catch someone who wasn't registered or uncover an arms dump. Either one would be disastrous. "All we can really do is hope and pray that they don't find anything that justifies a massacre."

The images from London had been broadcast over the BBC. Alex had watched in horror as hundreds — perhaps thousands — of humans had been shredded by alien guns. The entire country had seen the bloody suppression of a riot, galvanising resistance to the alien occupation. If the internet was to be believed, there had been hundreds of strikes against the aliens over the last few days. It certainly explained why the aliens were being so determined to sweep for insurgents. Anything was better than waiting to be hit, hoping that

superior firepower would allow them to slaughter anyone foolish enough to attack their positions.

There were upwards of 15'000 people in Dereham. It looked as if the aliens were systematically pulling them out of their homes and ordering them to gather in the roads, waiting for their fate to be decided. The aliens were ransacking the buildings, searching for weapons and anything else that might imply a link to the resistance. Alex could see a handful of policemen looking uncomfortable as the searches continued, unsure of just what they were feeling. Some policemen had been pushed into collaboration, no doubt about that, but others had been willing to serve the aliens without threats. It was hard to blame someone who served because his family was at risk, yet how could they tell the difference between that and a man who was serving the aliens for personal gain? Some of the rumours on the internet were shocking.

"Come on," she hissed. "We can't stay here."

It had taken nearly two hours to walk cross-country to Dereham and they'd arrived just in time to see the aliens establish themselves in the area. Alex had no illusions about what they would do once they'd secured the town; they'd sweep out, probably in the direction of Norwich. They had a major presence in that town and given enough time, they could probably safeguard the roads as well. A few of Alex's allies had been placing IEDs in the area, but that had its own dangers. The last thing they wanted to do was accidentally catch a farmer with an IED.

She scowled as they made their way across a field, which had recently been planted with an alien crop. One of the stranger points about British farming before the invasion had been that the government had paid a number of farmers to leave their fields lying fallow, rather than growing crops. It had been cheaper, apparently, to bring in food from overseas, which had worked perfectly until the country had been cut off from the rest of the world by the aliens. The aliens, on the other hand, had made a list of every farmer with fallow fields and ordered them to start growing seeds they'd provided. They hadn't gone into details, but they seemed to believe that the crop would be grown before winter, allowing it to be harvested and a second crop planted after the winter snows had faded away. Alex wasn't too surprised to see that they were planting crops from their world, but Smith had been furious. Adding something new to the ecology could cause chaos across the entire country.

"It was bad enough when they started planting those damn genetically-modified crops," he'd said, holding up one of the alien seeds. It hadn't looked very alien, but someone down in the town had looked at it through a microscope and confirmed that it bore no

resemblance to something from Earth. “These things are likely to spread further and there won’t be anything we can do about it.”

The thought was chilling — and the internet speculation had been downright horrific. Introducing rabbits to Australia had been disastrous because the rabbits had had no natural predators and had bred like… well, rabbits. Alien plants might be resistant to Earth’s formidable array of crop-destroying pests, while alien animals might be tougher than foxes or weasels or the other predators that hunted rabbits and field mice. Alex had tried to imagine an animal from the alien homeworld, but had drawn a blank. They could look like anything.

She could hear the sounds of alien helicopters in the distance as they walked onwards, watching carefully for any sign of an alien or collaborator patrol. They’d had some close calls in the days since they’d started trying to ambush the aliens, but the aliens seemed to have preferred to keep their distance. Maybe their current sweep was intended to change that — no matter what some of the young men thought, she had no illusions. They were barely pin-pricking the aliens. The aliens might not consider them significant enough to bother killing.

“You could come to the dance with me,” Henry said, breaking into her thoughts. “It would be a fun time to let your hair down.”

Alex rolled her eyes. Henry was seventeen; she was twenty-five. And she wanted to minimise the contact between her and the townspeople as much as possible. Officially, she was Smith’s niece from across the country, but it wouldn’t be long before someone guessed at the truth. There had been quite a few fugitives who had found new homes in the countryside, yet the aliens were alarmingly good at using human files to track down military personnel. And if they caught Alex… no one knew what would happen to her.

And Henry was clearly interested in her. Part of her was tempted, despite the age difference — Henry wasn’t a bad person at all. But the rest of her knew better. She’d been between boyfriends when she’d been shot down during the opening days of the invasion and… if she opened herself up that far, it risked creating emotional ties. One day, she would have to leave Long Stratton if the aliens threatened to take over the area directly — and then she would have to avoid looking back.

“It wouldn’t be a good idea for me to be seen,” she said, finally. There were younger girls in the town, she told herself firmly. He’d find someone closer in age to himself. “I need to spend more time at the hole anyway.”

The thought made her smile. Smuggling guns and explosives to hiding places well away from the town had been a challenge, but once

they'd completed the program it had been easy to separate the different resistance cells. The aliens might catch one of them, only to discover that they had no leads to the next one. Or so she hoped. If someone had defied orders… she shook her head. The RAF had tried to control every aspect of her life as a pilot, but the resistance needed a much looser organisation. She would just have to trust that they knew what to do — and knew better than to contact her.

Henry said nothing for the rest of the walk back to the coppice that served as a rendezvous point. Alex's RAF training hadn't included building shelters, but Archer had uncovered a couple of ex-poachers who were remarkably talented at slipping unseen through the night, or building hidden dumps for the weapons. She knew she could live alone out in the countryside for quite some time, but that would mean giving up the fight and walking away, forgetting her oath to the country. They dumped most of their weapons in the stash and headed down towards Smith's farm. He'd been spending the last few days planting the alien seeds in the ground, cursing the aliens all the while. At least they'd gotten a petrol ration out of it.

"That's funny," Henry commented. "Where is he?"

Alex looked over at him, and then down at her watch. It was early afternoon, the time Smith normally worked in the fields. Henry was right. Where was he? More carefully now, Alex walked forward to the farmhouse and quietly peered around the corner. There was no sign of his Range Rover in the shed. He had to have gone out and… she touched the door and it opened, revealing that it was unlocked. Alarm bells ringing in her head, she inched into the farmhouse and looked around. There was no sign of Smith, or his wife.

"No sign of a struggle," Henry pointed out. Alex relaxed slightly. He was right. It looked as if Smith and Jean had had to go down to the town, leaving the door unlocked for her. And yet… something wasn't quite right. She slipped upstairs and checked the bedrooms, finding nothing that suggested trouble. "They might have just gone out for a drive…"

"Maybe," Alex said. "Or maybe…"

The sound of alien helicopters echoed out of nowhere. Alex started, and then ran for the door, suddenly certain what she'd see outside. Five helicopters were racing towards the farmhouse, aliens already rappelling down ropes to hit the ground just as the helicopters came to a halt. Alex reached for the gun she'd shoved into her belt, but it was far too late. A dozen aliens were advancing towards her, weapons pointed right at her chest. How the hell had they known…? It struck her, suddenly, that the aliens might have been watching as they walked back from Dereham. They could have orbited a drone so high overhead that the naked eye couldn't have made it out against

the sun's glare…

"Put up your hands," the lead alien ordered. "Resistance is futile…"

Henry drew his pistol and opened fire, shooting madly towards the aliens. Alex could have told him not to waste his energy. The handguns they had weren't that accurate and alien body armour was more than enough to protect them, unless they were hit in the uncovered parts of their heads. They opened fire, their shells blowing Henry apart and scattering his bloody remains across the farmyard. Alex kept very still, thinking hard. Who had betrayed her? Smith and his wife, or someone down at the town? Probably the latter, she told herself, and she hoped that she was right. She didn't want to think that Smith might have betrayed her.

The aliens came closer, dark unblinking eyes fixed on her form. Their hands seemed to end in oversized fingernails — no, those were claws — and she had to fight not to cringe back as they tore at her clothes, removing her pistol and everything else she'd been carrying on her person. The claws seemed sharp enough to cut through her bare skin, convincing her that trying to fight hand-to-hand with the aliens was a bad idea. They kept two weapons pointed at her at all times, even after they'd finished searching her and wrapped a plastic tie around her hands, binding them behind her back. She wanted to laugh, or cry. They'd caught her — and if they knew how important she was to the resistance cells, they'd torture her until she talked. If they hadn't caught Archer, perhaps he'd know to order the cells to scatter before Alex broke. He'd assume the worst, wouldn't he?

They pushed her to the ground and left her there while they searched the house. It was hard to see what they were doing from her position, but it sounded as though they were tearing down most of the walls and smashing the windows. God alone knew what they were looking for, unless it was a weapons dump. She snorted at the thought. The only weapons kept in the house were her pistol and Smith's shotgun. They wouldn't find anything else. Finally, they pulled her to her feet and marched her towards one of their hover-vehicles. The interior was surprisingly roomy compared to some of the vehicles she'd seen in Afghanistan, but it would have been designed for alien bodies. They clanged the hatch shut behind her, leaving her in darkness. There was no light at all inside the chamber.

A faint hum echoed through the vehicle and she realised, after a moment, that they were on their way. There weren't supposed to be any IEDs hidden around Smith's farm, but she found herself hoping that someone had disobeyed orders and planted one in a position where it might catch the alien convoy. If they interrogated her… she resolved to hold out as long as possible, or invent lies to keep the

aliens happy. She knew that there had been hundreds of attacks on the aliens that had had nothing to do with her little band — if she claimed credit for them, it should confuse the aliens a little. It might even might them slow down their sweeps in the belief that they'd caught the resistance's leader…

Or maybe that was just wishful thinking.

She had almost lost track of time when the hum faded away and she heard the sound of scrabbling on the outside of the vehicle. The hatch clicked open, revealing a pair of aliens looking down at her. One of them reached for her leg with a clawed hand and pulled her towards the hatch, while the other held a gun pointed at her head. Alex almost burst out laughing, wondering just why the aliens thought she was so dangerous. She was alone, her hands were bound behind her back and she was unarmed. Did they think she was Wonder Woman or someone else with superhuman strength?

They pulled her out of the vehicle and held her upright long enough to regain her balance, before pushing her towards a gate in a massive fence. Inside, there were a large number of humans — all female, wearing rags. A second camp, some distance away, held men. They didn't look to be in any better shape. One of the aliens caught her hands, clipped the plastic tie free, and then shoved her through the gate. It closed behind her with an ominous click.

"Alex," a voice said. "Thank God you're alive!"

Alex turned to see Jean, Smith's wife, standing there. "Someone in the town betrayed us," she said, bitterly. It looked as if she'd been crying. "They came for us, arrested us and dumped us here. I hoped you're get away."

"I walked right into them," Alex admitted. It gave her no pleasure to admit the truth, but there was no point in lying. She looked at her fellow captives and shivered. Most of them looked to have spent weeks in the detention camp, fed on very little. They looked thin and worn. There were some blankets to lie on, but no shelters. Alex realised that many of them were suffering from exposure. The aliens didn't seem to care. "And then they just brought me here."

Over the next few hours, she chatted to many of the women. They'd all been taken as prisoners by alien sweeps, apparently because they were linked to one or more of the insurgents. Several of the women thought that they'd been picked up at random, although they liked to think that their husbands or brothers were still fighting the aliens. A number had had military personnel in their families, although Alex was the only actual military person in the camp. The male camp didn't look to be any different. In fact, both camps appeared to be reaching capacity.

Jean caught her arm. "What are we going to do?"

Alex looked up, past the wire. They were inside an alien base, surrounded by aliens — and she didn't even know where they were. The alien vehicles moved with astonishing speed. They could be in Scotland, or Wales, or on the other side of London… there was no way to know for sure. It looked as if the aliens had built their base on top of a RAF base, but it wasn't one she recognised. That really only excluded a handful of bases from consideration.

And if they were removing military personnel, why hadn't they taken her? A moment later, it struck her — they *hadn't* identified her. They presumably thought she was just a civilian insurgent, rather than a military officer carrying on the war. And that gave her an edge, if she stayed alive long enough to figure out how to use it.

"I don't know," she admitted. No, that wasn't quite true. "We can't do anything at the moment, so we wait. Who knows? Maybe the horse will learn to sing."

Chapter Twenty-Five

London
United Kingdom, Day 35

"No, I don't know why they want you," Robin said, as patiently as he could. "All I know is that we have been ordered to pick you up and hand you over to them."

Silently, he cursed his orders under his breath. The aliens had ordered their puppet Prime Minister to round up several hundred people from London, people who seemed to have little in common. They certainly didn't have any links to the resistance as far as Robin could see. Once rounded up, they were to be handed over to the aliens and then… there was no clear answer. It didn't sound very good, but what choice did they have? The aliens wouldn't be anything like as patient with reluctant humans.

The young man they'd been sent to pick up didn't look very healthy. In fact, like most of the city's population, he'd clearly been losing weight now that he had nothing to eat, but the tasteless mush the aliens supplied. Real food was only available for collaborators and on the black market and their target lacked the contacts to obtain something that would have been readily available a month ago. Robin couldn't think of any reason why the aliens wanted him in particular, but they had clearly made up their minds. The young man's mother and father looked just as worried, even though they weren't coming with him. And the looks they were casting at Robin when they thought he wasn't watching…

He shivered. It was normal for people to be a little nervous around the police. Everyone had something weighing on their minds, even if it was comparatively minor compared to serial killing or paedophilia. The police represented law and order. But now…? Now the entire city — the entire country — was afraid of the police. The slaughter in Central London had broken their reputation once and for all. On their drive to the young man's house, they'd avoided several stones thrown at them by youths — and there were parts of the city that were no-go zones for them now. Robin hated conceding anything to the thugs who called themselves community leaders, but the alternative was to ask the aliens to help. And that would mean another slaughter.

Some policemen, including several he knew personal, had deserted, vanishing into London's overcrowded city blocks. Several others had killed themselves, swallowing vast quantities of painkillers or hanging themselves from the ceiling. Even those that had tried to

remain on duty had been demoralised, after the slaughter. They knew that they were forever tainted by what the aliens had done, even though they'd never ordered it or wanted it to happen. How could they ever seek forgiveness from an angry population?

"It's going to be fine," Robin said, although he suspected otherwise. "You're allowed to take an overnight bag with you, so pack clean underwear and anything else you think you might need."

They waited while the young man and his mother packed a bag. Robin half-hoped that their target would take the opportunity to vanish out of the back door and into the side streets before they could catch him, but he didn't seem to have the nerve. He returned to the door with a large bag slung over his shoulder and an expression that suggested that he was going to his own funeral. Robin, who'd had a moment to study the awards pinned to the wall, suspected otherwise. The aliens had lost one of their projects when the suicide bomber had blown up Gilmore Technical College, but they were still interested in human computers. And the people on the list they'd been ordered to bring in had vast computer experience. It made little sense to him — the aliens could cross the stars, which suggested they should have better computers — but it was the only reason he could imagine. Or maybe they just wanted hostages to shoot.

He escorted the young man down and into the police car, scowling at the rotten egg someone had smashed across the windscreen while they'd been in the house. A quick check around the vehicle revealed no signs that anyone had tried to place an IED under the car, like the bomb that had killed two policemen three days ago. The resistance seemed to be conserving its weapons, which hadn't stopped it and various criminal gangs improvising weapons and using them to attack the police. Who would have thought that something would unite London's disparate political and religious factions against a single target? Robin would have been mildly impressed if he hadn't been the target.

The drive through London's empty streets took longer than he had expected. Several cars had been moved out of place and used to block or divert police traffic, while several groups of young men looking for trouble had made threatening motions towards the car. At least the gangs weren't trying to attack the alien base in Central London, not after they'd realised that the alien guards had authority to return fire with live ammunition. It hadn't stopped the resistance from setting up a mortar every few days and lobbing shells into the alien positions.

He winced as he caught sight of the prostitutes on one street corner. So many women had been rendered homeless or broke by the invasion that there were currently thousands of prostitutes in London. Many of them would have preferred to be doing something —

anything — else, but the aliens weren't interested in relief programs. They doled out their tasteless food and otherwise left the population to live or die on its own. Robin knew that some policemen had suggested finding roles for the women within the civil service, but the suggestion hadn't found favour with the collaborator government. Perhaps the civil servants had managed to cobble together a union and get a ban on scab labour. The thought made him smile. If there was anything capable of working through an alien invasion, it was the British civil service.

"So," the young man said, "where are you taking me?"

"We're taking you to the aliens," Robin said. He wanted to tell a comforting lie. "I don't know what they want to do with you."

"And you work for them," the young man asked. "How do you sleep at night?"

Robin bit down the response that came to mind. The truth was that he didn't sleep very well at night, something shared by almost all of the policemen he knew. When he closed his eyes, he saw the slaughter the aliens had unleashed, or the helpless looks on their prisoners as they marched them off to an unknown fate. He thought about his wife, safe yet isolated outside the city, and shivered. If she knew what he'd done in the name of the aliens, she would never want to sleep beside him again. Some policemen had started popping sleeping pills and antidepressants, just to keep themselves going. He wondered how long it would be before he found himself doing the same thing, or perhaps taking one of the concealed weapons and putting a bullet through his own brain.

"Badly," he said, finally. He took firm hold of his temper before the urge to lash out grew too overpowering. The young man wasn't to blame. Several policemen had given into the stress and started beating their suspects, but he didn't want to fall that far. "If I'd known what they would be like back then…"

But they hadn't had a choice, had they? How easily they'd clambered onto the slippery slope! And how hard it would be to wash the blood from their hands. They'd told themselves that they were protecting the people, but they'd become the tools of the aliens — the same aliens who had slaughtered thousands in London just to keep the peace. They weren't protecting the people any longer, were they? They'd become another alien tool.

And yet… what choice did they have?

He remembered the weapons and shivered again. They could take them and fight back… and be destroyed when the aliens started using heavy weapons on London. There were reports that the aliens had already destroyed a number of small towns for daring to fight when the aliens arrived, or that they'd wrecked havoc in other parts of the

world. Against such firepower, what could they do? The only thing they could do was die bravely. And every day, the thought of death seemed more and more attractive. He looked down at his hands and wondered if he would ever be able to wash the bloodstains off his soul.

They came to a halt by the alien fence and waited for the alien guards to confirm their identity. Once they were satisfied that they had the right person, the aliens took the young man away, leaving Robin and Constable Jasper to their own devices. Robin watched the gate swing closed behind them and then ordered Jasper to take them back to the station. He had a bottle of brandy he'd picked up from one of the abandoned houses in his locker. If he drank it all, perhaps he would get drunk and forget about the rest of the world. Or perhaps he'd just wake up with a hangover and have to go back on duty anyway.

And tell me, he thought, rather sourly. Bitter self-hatred welled up within him. How many had died because he had chosen to collaborate with the aliens? Each of his justifications felt less and less logical every time he thought about them. *What exactly do you deserve*?

* * *

"I can't do much for the wound," Fatima admitted. "The best I can do is separate it properly and bandage it up."

"You mean amputate my arm," the man in front of her said. He'd taken an alien bullet that had punched right through his upper arm, shattering his bone to dust. His arm now hung limply from what remained of his flesh, bound up with cloth to prevent it from tearing loose and falling to the floor. "There's nothing else you can do?"

Fatima shook her head. The resistance had gathered what medical supplies they could, but London had been short on medical supplies and equipment ever since the invasion. There were wounded that would have made a full recovery — if they had the right equipment — who would almost certainly be cripples for the rest of their lives. The man who'd lost an arm was hardly the worst of them. She honestly didn't know how some of them had held on to their lives. Determination to hurt the aliens before they died, perhaps.

"I'm afraid not," she said, as she started to wash her hands. The NHS had a poor reputation for keeping hospitals clean, but none of the ones she'd worked in had been anything like as bad as the abandoned house they'd turned into a medical centre. It had taken her hours to clean the place to a minimum standard and even then she had a feeling that it was still alarmingly unhealthy. "We don't have

prosthetics we could use to give you a new arm, or replace the shattered bone. Even if we did have, I'm not sure you could recover after that level of trauma."

The man nodded, scowling down at the floor. He'd been given a large dose of painkillers, but they clearly hadn't been enough to keep the pain from making it harder for him to think. Fatima wasn't too surprised. Taking too many of the painkillers would have been bad for his health too.

"And if I chose to stay like this?" He asked, finally. "I could…"

"You wouldn't recover any function in your lower arm or your hand," Fatima said, flatly. She didn't really blame him for refusing to realise the truth. Humans hated losing parts of their bodies. Trauma victims never fully recovered. "You would be left with a useless dangling piece of flesh - one that would have to be bound to your body at all times. My best advice is to have it taken off, which would at least prevent the wound from becoming infected."

"Take it off, them," he said, finally. He smiled, although Fatima could see the pain written over his face. "I guess there's no hope of a proper rest afterwards?"

"Probably not," she said, as she prepared the local anaesthetic. He should have been put out completely, but she preferred to avoid doing that if possible. They had had to abandon two other makeshift hospitals and unconscious patients were difficult to move. "Just lie back and let me get on with it."

An hour later, she headed downstairs and washed her hands under the shower. The small apartment had been abandoned, according to Abdul and his men, which made it an ideal place for a resistance cell. Fatima hoped that they were right, if only because she didn't want to have to abandon her patients. Most of the wounded resistance fighters were scattered over London, but the seriously wounded fighters were kept near her. She was their doctor, after all.

She sat down on the sofa and closed her eyes, fighting back tears. As a medical student, and then as a doctor, she'd taken pride in her work. She'd saved lives. Men and women who would have died a century ago had lived because of her — and the medical knowledge of hundreds of years. Now… she hated doing a bad job, but the truth was that there were limits to what she could do without proper equipment and supplies. Many of her patients needed a real hospital, not a makeshift set of beds which they might need to flee at any time. She'd asked if they could find a way to slip a patient into a real hospital, but Abdul had vetoed the idea. The aliens had insisted that the NHS doctors check their patients details and if they stumbled across a resistance fighter…

Fatima shook her head, wondering — again — what had

happened to her family. There'd been no announcement of their fate on the BBC, just a terrible silence that was somehow far more terrifying than anything else. Anything could have happened to them — the aliens could have killed them, or enslaved them, or simply dumped them in a detention camp outside the city. After the bloody slaughter the aliens had unleashed, few dared to ask them — or to demand that the prisoners be returned to their families. For all she knew, they could have been shipped to Africa and dumped there.

The only thing keeping her from crying was the knowledge that her patients needed her — for all the good she could do for them. She had to watch many of them die because she didn't have the equipment to save them — and as they died, a little of herself died as well. If they hadn't needed her, she would have volunteered to drive the next truck loaded with explosives into the alien base. And that would be the end of her.

"Hey," a soft voice said, "are you all right?"

Fatima glanced up to see Lucas, a young man who'd been serving the resistance as a runner, ever since his family had been caught up in the invasion and killed. He'd wanted to join the fighters, but his knowledge of the area made him far more useful as a runner. Or so he'd been told. Privately, Fatima suspected that Lucas wouldn't have made a good fighter. He only wanted to hurt the aliens and didn't care if he got hurt himself.

And he was attracted to her. She found him attractive too, and attentive, but how could she afford more emotional ties with anyone? Her family was gone, perhaps dead… anyone else she invited into her heart might go the same way. She didn't dare take the chance.

"Just tired," she said, pulling herself to her feet. She should have a rest, but there was no way she could sleep long enough for it to do her any good. "And yourself?"

"I got told to bring you a warning," Lucas said. "The aliens did a sweep through a few blocks a mile or so away. They may have caught someone who knows about this place."

Fatima swallowed a curse. Her stepmother would have slapped her if she'd realised that Fatima even *knew* such a word. The aliens had the services of the police — and the police knew how to get suspects to talk and implicate more people. If they knew who they'd bagged, they might uncover the makeshift medical centre. Abdul had made it clear that no one — even himself — was to know everything, but the aliens might uncover more than one cell if they managed to capture the medical centre.

And three of her patients really shouldn't be moved.

"Go tell the patients upstairs that we might have to move," Fatima ordered. Given time, she was sure that she could get all of the

patients out, but could they do it without alerting the aliens and their collaborators? “Is anyone else coming to help?”

“The Big Man says he’s sending some of his men,” Lucas said. He grinned. When he wasn’t passing on messages, he spent most of his time with the soldiers. They were teaching him tricks he might need when he finally joined the fight. “Anyone who can’t move under his own power will be helped.”

Fatima nodded. And after that, she knew, they’d leave an IED behind, just in the hopes of bagging an alien or a few collaborators. They’d done it before. Abdul had pointed out that creating an impression of a network of IEDs slowed down enemy deployment, even if there were only a handful of real IEDs in the area. It had worked in Afghanistan and now it was working in London. Absently, she wondered how men who’d fought in Afghanistan liked using their enemy’s tactics against the enemy of the entire planet?

“Come on then,” she said. “Let’s start moving the patients.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Alien Detention Camp
United Kingdom, Day 36

The first few days in the detention camp were unpleasant. Alex wasn't sure why the aliens hadn't bothered to provide shelters for their prisoners, which meant that when it rained — as it did every night — the bedding became soaked and refused to dry until the morning. A number of the prisoners were already suffering from exposure and were at death's door, but the aliens didn't seem concerned. When she was feeling charitable, which wasn't very often, Alex guessed that the aliens *liked* the rain and believed that the humans would like it too. The other explanation was that the aliens were deliberately torturing their captives and breaking their will to resist. It seemed as likely as any other possibility.

She had spent the first day studying the alien base, what little she could see of it from behind the wire. It seemed to be a small military base, although it was definitely not as active as Bastion or any of the other major bases she'd deployed to before the aliens had invaded and turned the entire planet upside down. Judging from the way they'd extended the wire several times since the invasion — several of the prisoners admitted to have been behind the wire since day one — they might just have intended it as a prison for rebellious types.

The next few days had been worse. She'd wondered endlessly who'd betrayed them — and why? Had the traitor been terrified for his life, or the lives of his family — or had he merely wanted thirty pieces of silver? The conditions outside the cities were better than inside the cities — at least if the internet was to be believed — but no one had been very safe. Perhaps the traitor, hearing stories about entire towns being blasted from orbit for daring to harbour resistance fighters, had decided that Long Stratton would be left unmolested if the resistance was handed over to the aliens. Absently, she wondered if Archer or any of the others had made it out safety, or if they'd been caught by the aliens. She tried to form mental pictures of them blasting their way through entire alien formations, but she had to admit that they weren't particularly likely. Archer had suggested heading into the national parks or other undeveloped parts of Britain and setting up long-term bases there. She hoped — prayed — that they managed to get out and carry on the fight. They would have to do it without her.

Every time she heard a noise in the sky, she looked up, wondering what she would see. Sometimes she saw the massive shuttles the

aliens used to land troops from orbit, too large to fly without some kind of antigravity device; sometimes their attack helicopters, larger than the outdated Russian helicopters that had been flown around Afghanistan. She allowed herself to hope that one day she'd see a streak of light shooting down one of the helicopters, but the resistance seemed to be very thin on the ground around the detention camp. The aliens, according to some of the older prisoners, had simply uprooted thousands of humans and ordered them away from their bases. Remembering some of the havoc caused by dickers — civilians who reported British military movements to the enemy — in Afghanistan, Alex couldn't blame them, even though the mobile phone network had never been restored.

She shook her head. The Taliban had never scored a major victory, but they'd kept up the pressure and they might have won in the long term — if the aliens hadn't invaded. But the Coalition had been bound by rules of engagement dreamed up by decent — if ignorant — politicians. The aliens didn't seem to care about civilian casualties and they were perfectly willing to obliterate entire towns to punish resistance. Weaker forces had defeated stronger forces before — or had at least convinced them to withdraw — but Alex couldn't remember if they'd ever done it when the stronger forces had also been the barbarians.

When the call came, it took her by surprise. A pair of aliens were standing by the gate, bellowing for her in their toneless voices. She hesitated, considering hiding within the crowd, before realising that it was pointless. Bracing herself, she strode out with as much dignity as she could muster and stopped in front of the aliens. One of them pointed his cannon-like weapon at his chest, as if he imagined that she was a threat. Alex couldn't keep the giggles from forming deep inside her chest. She was half-naked, half-starved and completely unarmed… and he thought she was a threat?

"Turn around and place your hands behind your back," the alien ordered. Alex obeyed, unsurprised to feel a metal tie contracting around her wrists. They weren't taking any chances, all right. Their voices were almost robotic. "Walk with us. Do not attempt to escape."

The alien strung her around and marched her towards the gate, which clanged shut behind them. Despite her growing nervousness, Alex was privately glad of the chance to inspect the rest of the base. A number of human-designed buildings were still intact, but others had clearly been knocked down and were being replaced by prefabricated alien buildings. She caught sight of what looked like a futuristic car at the end of one building, before her escort marched her onwards, half-pulling her whenever she tried to slow them down. The sound of alien voices speaking what had to be their own language — it sounded like

grunting to her ears — caught her attention and she looked up. A small group of aliens was staring at her, their dark eyes wide. Surely she wasn't the first human they'd seen…

And these aliens were smaller. For a moment, she wondered if they were children, before realising that they were differently proportioned than her escort. Alien females? She'd assumed that the aliens had their own version of keeping women barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen, but maybe they made better use of female labour than some human societies. Their clothing was different too… she wondered, absently, how the aliens mated, before pushing the thought aside. It was clear that she was about to have far more serious problems.

A human designed building loomed up in front of her and the aliens pushed her right into the darkness. For a moment, Alex was completely disorientated before her eyes adjusted to the gloom. There was a chair in the centre of the room, bolted to the floor, and the aliens pushed her down onto the cold metal. She yelped as they stubbed her bound wrists, before, fixing a bar around her chest and walking away. The door closed behind them with an audible clunk.

"Well, well, well," a voice said, from the darkness. "What have we here?"

Alex started, peering ahead of her. In the gloom, she could make out two figures, both clearly human. They didn't *seem* to be restrained. The light came on suddenly, almost blinding her. The two men definitely weren't restrained. Alien collaborators… or something else? But what else could they be?

"Who…?" Her throat was dry. She could barely speak. "Who are you?"

"Our names aren't important," one of the men said. They were both wearing masks to cover their identities, but the speaker was clearly taller than the other. "All that really matters is satisfying our masters."

He stood up and advanced towards Alex, rubbing his hands together. "You're been a very naughty girl," he said, mockingly. "The government surrendered — and you kept the war going all on your own." His mouth, what little she could see of it, leered. "But now the war is over and you're a prisoner. No one even knows where you are."

Alex braced herself, remembering the dreaded Conduct After Capture course they'd been put through during training. The Geneva Conventions had become a joke after the end of the Cold War and the MOD had — reluctantly — admitted that British personnel *would* be tortured and forced to talk by their captors. They'd been given guidelines, but the decision on how much to say and cooperate had been left with the captured personnel. Alex remembered seeing

captured personnel broadcasting from Iran and shuddered. At least a personnel broadcast from her wouldn't have any effect on the rest of the resistance. She barely knew *anything* that could be used against anyone else.

"Cooperate with us now and you will be well-treated," the interrogator said. She could feel his breath on her ear. "We have good food and you can rest. You did your duty — now it's over. You can relax."

His finger reached out and traced her chin, gently pulling her head up so she was staring into his eyes. "It's over," he said, gently. "Who else was involved with your resistance cell?"

Alex looked down and shook her head. "Come on," he said, gently. "There's really nothing to be gained by further resistance. We *are* going to get it out of you, one way or the other. Why not make it easier upon yourself?"

He stepped back and reached for a small tray lying on his desk. When he stepped back into view, he was holding a small bar of chocolate in his hand. "You know, you used to be able to get as much chocolate as you wanted for a few pounds," he said. "Now… now you can't get chocolate at all, unless you have *connections*." He spoke the last word with another leer as he opened the packet. "Wouldn't you like some chocolate?"

Alex recoiled as he held a piece out under her nose. After a few days in the detention camp, part of her wanted the chocolate — and part of her refused to take anything from her interrogator. He held it closer, just above her mouth, waiting to see what she would say. Her mouth was watering, but she shook her head. Perhaps he was right, perhaps it was hopeless, yet she wasn't going to break so easily. She swore to herself that she wouldn't break at all.

"You seem to believe that you can remain silent," the interrogator said. He popped a piece of chocolate into his mouth and ate it with evident enjoyment. "But believe me, you will talk."

Without warning, he slapped her across the cheek. Alex gasped in pain, feeling blood trickling down the side of her face. Her entire face hurt. He leaned closer and pushed his face against hers, almost as if he intended to kiss her. When he spoke, his voice was a dull whisper.

"You will talk," he said. "We have all the time in the world to break your resistance. You will be broken apart and then you will tell us everything we want to know. Do you understand me? Resistance is futile."

He slapped her again. Alex felt an unholy ringing in her head, which faded slowly. She hadn't had anything like enough to eat over the past few days. Chances were they'd held her long enough for hunger to set in and weaken her resistance. Her lips felt bloody and

broken after the two slaps. The strap around her chest seemed to be contracting, squeezing the breath out of her. It was all she could do to remain aware and alert.

A glint of light caught her eye and she froze as the interrogator advanced towards her with a knife. He was going to cut her throat… for a moment, she was gripped with absolute terror, just before realising that they would hardly let her go that easily. She felt a tug as he pulled at what remained of her shirt, slicing it away from her bare skin. Her bra followed, leaving her breasts exposed to their gaze. She cringed back as he pinched her nipple, before turning his attention to her trousers. When he had finished, she was naked and exposed — and helpless. No amount of struggling would break the tie they'd put around her chest.

"Do you understand me?" The interrogator whispered. "You will talk, one way or the other. Talk now and we won't have to hurt you any longer…"

Alex tried to lose herself in thought. Where had the interrogator come from? She knew that some policemen were collaborating, but surely they would draw the line at such an interrogation… But the aliens had presumably taken the prisons as well. They'd have plenty of volunteers for an interrogation crew if they broke open the cells containing violent offenders. Some of the stories she'd read in the newspapers over the years had been horrific, like the brother who had casually tortured his own sister to death. He'd been jailed for a very long time — but had the aliens freed him and put him to work?

They didn't seem to enjoy making people suffer themselves. The aliens stamped hard on resistance, and they were indiscriminate when it came to applying heavy weapons, but they didn't have the sadistic urges that many human despots had indulged. But if they'd found humans who did enjoy making people suffer… the thought was sickening. If someone had suggested it to the aliens…

A hand grabbed her breast and squeezed, hard. Another reached down and clawed between her legs. Alex screamed for the first time, trying to bring her leg up to kick out at her tormentor. He slapped it down and then yanked at her breast. Alex felt her mind start to blur as he slapped her time and time again, the pain threatening to drag her down into the darkness. She'd lost track of time. How long had she been tortured… she heard a hiss and opened her eyes, in time to see a single jet of blue fire right in front of her eyes.

"You won't be such a pretty face when I'm through with you," her interrogator whispered. There was no doubt at all that he was enjoying himself. Alex cringed back as the heat came closer and closer to her face, only to be pulled away just before it started to burn her skin. "Do you know how many women I've beaten and broken here?

How many are nothing more than my slaves, dependent upon me for everything?"

Alex tried to speak, but it was so hard to concentrate. She wanted to give in, and yet some stubborn part of her nature refused to surrender. The pain was growing; she was suddenly aware that he'd freed her from the chair, only to roll her over so she was bent over the chair, her buttocks lifted up for his inspection. Something sent a wave of pain over her rear and she screamed again, feeling a desperate desire to be sick that sent a tidal wave of vomit out of her mouth. Everything she'd eaten in the camp, as mushy and tasteless as it had been, seemed to be spilling out of her.

She felt his hands on her rear, spreading her thighs. And then she felt him pressing his hardness into her… the pain and humiliation overwhelmed her, sending her crashing down into darkness. Her last thought, shining out against the blackness, was that she'd told them nothing…

* * *

"Are you all right?"

Alex opened her eyes slowly, unsure of what had happened to her. She found herself in a small cell, staring up at a naked girl. The bruises on her skin told their own story. Every single piece of Alex's body *hurt* in ways she would have thought unimaginable. It hurt to try to open her mouth and speak. The pain around her breasts was horrific.

"Remain still," the girl urged. "He's cut you, the bastard. I don't know if you'll recover…"

Somehow, despite the pain, Alex managed to pull herself up into a sitting position — and instantly regretted it. Her buttocks felt as if they were on fire. Carefully, she inspected herself and saw red marks and cuts covering her skin. Some of them looked to have broken the skin, only to be allowed to heal on their own, without interference. She glanced around the dirty cell and realised that there was a good chance that one or more of the scars would become infected. And then… she doubted that they'd give her any medical treatment. Maybe the infection would finish her off quickly.

"What…?" She managed to say. Her mouth still hurt, even when she touched it. They'd slapped her, she recalled. Maybe they'd knocked out a tooth or two. Or maybe… hadn't she read a book, once, where the hero had had his teeth removed to make him talk? She didn't seem to be missing any teeth, but her mouth hurt too much for her to be sure. "What happened to me?"

“They dumped you in here,” the girl said. “I don’t think you told him anything. He was proper raging when he left you here and told me to take care of you. I think he’s probably afraid that the Leathernecks will be angry with him for failing to get anything out of you.”

“Good,” Alex managed, finally. Maybe they’d send him to be interrogated instead. A taste of his own medicine would teach him a lesson. “Where… where did they get you?”

The girl hesitated, and then shrugged. “My brother was killed by the bastards and I was taken away,” she said. “When I woke up, I was here — at his mercy. You… you don’t know what they’ve done to me…”

“I think I can guess,” Alex said. The bastard had raped her, just as he’d raped Alex. Part of her wanted to crawl into a corner and die, but the rest of her wanted revenge. There would be a chance to kill the bastard and she intended to take it. It was the only thing left to her. “Do you have more water? Something to wash?”

“There’s a shower over there, but the water’s always cold,” the girl said. Alex pulled herself to her feet, despite the pain, and staggered towards the little chamber. “They do it on purpose, the bastards.”

“Probably,” Alex agreed. Her body was stained with blood — and his seed. She wanted to be clean again, even though she felt as if she would never be clean. “But we will get them, one day.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Near Alien Detention Camp
United Kingdom, Day 40

"Jimmy!"

Jimmy Coates scowled as he heard his wife calling his name. What did the dumb bitch want now? It was bad enough that she picked a fight with him about each and every little thing, but she wouldn't allow him to respond to her stupid arguments. So what if he drank too much and came rolling home drunk? She'd come rolling home drunk if she saw half the shit he had to see, as well as the looks people gave a collaborator when they thought one of the aliens wasn't watching. And who cared if the fucking cooking club bitches had voted to throw Ginny out on her arse? Just because they didn't want a collaborator's wife…

"What?" He demanded, furiously. There were times when he thought that going to the whorehouses would be a good way to punish a shrewish spouse. It wasn't as if there was a shortage of whores these days. Pussy was cheap when so many were starving, kept alive by the mush the aliens doled out every week to those who bent the knee to them. "What's so fucking important that you have to drag me out of the bathroom?"

"They're saying there's going to be a national announcement in twenty minutes," his wife shouted back. God — what had he been thinking when he married her? She'd trapped him, all right; she'd told him that she was on the pill. But she'd gotten pregnant and her father had insisted that he marry her, or else. Jimmy still remembered the moment when he'd realised that he'd been trapped, forced into a marriage to a girl he didn't love. And even though they'd had three brats together, he still didn't love her. "You have to watch it too."

Jimmy snorted, but didn't argue any further. The BBC was wholly controlled by the aliens these days and they used it to make sure that their subjects heard announcements that might otherwise be missed. When they weren't issuing orders, they were showing old soap operas and movies, rather than anything else. The once-famed BBC news service had terminated two days after the aliens landed, never to be replaced. It seemed that the aliens believed that humans were only to know what they needed to know, rather than have news from all over the world pumped into their living rooms. Jimmy was almost relieved. His wife and her cooking group had held sales for every lost cause across the world, apart from Britain itself. No one was allowed to mention how Britain had problems…

He stumbled down the stairs, cursing the five pints of beer he'd downed after leaving work earlier, and crashed into the living room. She'd decorated it, of course, with all of her frilly decorations, rather than the beer table and fridge he would have preferred. Surely a man could design at least one room in his house. But no, it was all her own work — and it had cost him a pretty penny too! He sat down in the armchair and pretended not to see his wife's lips thinning with disapproval. So what if he was half-drunk? It wasn't as if he wasn't providing for her, was it? She still got half of his salary — real alien money — and there were goods in the shops for those who had alien money. They ate better than all of their neighbours.

The television was showing the end of one of the soap operas he so detested, but he told himself to be patient. It wasn't easy, not when his wife was either looking at the television or scowling at him, giving him the look that suggested that she regretted marrying him almost as much as he regretted marrying her. But it wasn't as if he'd had any choice… and then there were the kids. He loved his kids, or at least he told himself he did, and he wouldn't want any harm to come to them. They'd be shattered if mum and dad broke up… maybe he would go to the whorehouse after all. It wasn't as if his wife was giving him access to her body any longer.

He looked up as the music announcing an alien broadcast caught his attention. The aliens always announced their broadcasts in advance, warning everyone to watch — or else. Jimmy had no idea what had got into their minds this time, but he knew better than to avoid watching, not when his very career depended upon them. The aliens seemed interested in recruiting thousands of humans and they paid well, although they were really the only paying employers these days, No doubt the wretched banking CEOs and others who made it impossible for a man to overcome his debt and stand tall had sold out to them. No one had any principles any longer.

"Case in point," he grunted, as the collaborator-in-chief appeared on the screen. Alan Beresford was just another MP who proved that there was no point in being loyal to the country. Why should he be loyal to a government that pardoned outright criminality among its own members and at the same time hectored him to improve his lifestyle? What fucking business of theirs was it if he smoked twenty fags in a day, or drank himself senseless every weekend? It wasn't as if there were any dreams any longer. How could they claim his loyalty when they so manifestly didn't deserve it? The last Prime Minister was probably hiding in a aristocratic mansion somewhere, while his successor was an outright collaborator.

His wife looked over at him. "Yes, Jimmy?"

"Oh, shut up," Jimmy grunted. He wanted a beer, any beer. But

he'd stashed all of his cans upstairs and there was none within reach. "I thought you admired this guy anyway."

"These have been tragic times for our country," Beresford said. Jimmy snorted. Somehow, he didn't think that Beresford had found them very tragic. It was clear that he was well-fed and content, even if he was the focus for a great deal of anger. The aliens would protect him if the lynch mob ever reached his door. "We have been forced to adapt to a new world order — and yet there are those who are resolved to fight to the bitter end. But their fight is hopeless — we are part of a greater universe now and it is time to earn our place in it."

"By whoring for the aliens, no doubt," Jimmy sneered. "Bet you're not worried about thugs slashing your tires when you park and go for a beer."

He smiled at the memory. It hadn't been that long ago that he and his fellow lorry drivers had caught a pair of young kids slashing their tires. They hadn't bothered to call the police, knowing that the little brats would only be let off with a warning. Instead, they'd thrashed hell out of them and abandoned them some miles from town. Jimmy had half-expected them to inform the police, but there had never been any comeback. Perhaps the police had figured that the brats deserved their treatment.

"We have broken many cells of bitter-enders, people who believe that they must still fight on," Beresford continued. "It is with great regret that I am forced to confirm that those fighters — who have killed far more innocent humans than aliens — will be executed in two days. Their deaths will serve as a warning — being a bitter-ender will bring you nothing, but grief. The entire population will see their executions on television. And then let us pray that that will be an end to the fighting. Our poor country has suffered enough.

"But you haven't suffered at all," Jimmy bellowed, and threw the remote at the television set. People like Beresford never suffered. They simply attached themselves to the centre of power and made themselves indispensible, at least until a new centre of power arrived. Bottom-feeders, the lot of them. "Do you really think that we will be impressed?"

"It gives me great pleasure to announce that the daily ration will be increased in response to the increasing number of people who have seen the inevitable and started to work with the aliens to build a new world," Beresford concluded. "Together, we will build a new Britain."

His face vanished from the display. Moments later, the next soap came on, while a small line of text underneath the pictures warned that the alien broadcast would be repeated every hour on the hour. Everyone in Britain would see it. And then they would watch in horror as the aliens executed their captives. Jimmy shrugged as he stood up.

What had Britain ever done for him that he should fight for it? He'd been nagged by the nanny-state since he was a little kid. Don't smoke, don't drink, don't question… we know what's best for you, never mind that you don't like it… we have the right to reshape you as we see fit…

He rolled his eyes, just as the doorbell rang. Jimmy blinked in surprise; ever since he'd gone to work for the aliens, their circle of friends had dwindled away to almost nothing. His wife had taken it harder than he had — he was happy as long as he had beer and a place to sleep. Perhaps it was one of the religious freaks who went around offering salvation — in exchange for a cash donation, of course — or someone collecting for charity. It seemed that the only endangered species unworthy of assistance was the white male.

Carefully — there *were* bitter-enders out there — he peered through the tiny spy hole and frowned. Two brisk young men stood in front of the door, wearing civilian clothes. They didn't *look* like religious freaks. Maybe they wanted to sign up with the aliens — it wouldn't be the first time he'd been approached by someone looking for a job. He opened the door and scowled down at them. They didn't seem intimidated by his face.

"We need to talk to you," one of them said. He stepped forward, put his foot neatly in place to prevent Jimmy from shutting the door, and pointed a gun right at his face. Jimmy jumped back in shock, feeling the pleasant haze of near-drunkenness fading away. "You're going to help us rescue our friends."

Jimmy found himself on the floor, looking up at them. "And if you don't help," the man added, "you're really not going to enjoy what happens next."

* * *

Alex rolled over as she heard the sound of the cell opening. They seemed to take her to a different cell after each interrogation session, sometimes with someone in the cell, sometimes empty so she had a chance to brood on what would happen to her next. Her body just ached constantly, the pain blurring together into a single mass tearing away at her mind. She was half-convinced that they were torturing her for the fun of it, or perhaps they were waiting for her to break. They certainly hadn't bothered to ask her any questions.

The light came on, revealing a man with a blood-stained face hobbling into the cell. Like her, he was naked, with dark blue-black bruises covering his entire body. She found herself wondering if she would recognise him, but as her eyes adapted to the light she realised

that he was a stranger. The blood on his face suggested that he'd been tortured worse than she had, at least physically. Being at the mercy of a pair of sadists who could do anything they wanted to her was taking its toll. The only thing keeping her from breaking was a bitter determination not to give them the pleasure.

"Hi," Alex said. So far, all of the other prisoners she'd met had been women. She hadn't even known that there were any male prisoners in the complex, although she wasn't really sure how large the complex actually was. It felt as if they were underground, but there was no way to know for sure. God alone knew if they were even still in Britain. "What did they do to you?"

The man stumbled to his knees, grunting in pain as he hit the stone floor. "They caught me two days ago," he said, quietly. Alex blinked in surprise. It looked as if he had been worked over more than once, but maybe she was mistaken. "They were lying in wait — wiped us out, apart from me. I was the lucky one they took alive."

There was a bitterness in his voice that was alarmingly convincing. "I was in Chester's group," he added. "Good old Chester — Shiny Two's Colonel. He's dead too, now."

Alex winced. Shiny Two was the nickname for 2 Para, one of the toughest units of fighting men in the British Army. She'd flown missions supporting their operations in Afghanistan, before returning to Britain and flying in defence of the UKADR. If they'd been wiped out, what hope was there for anyone else?

"We lost contact with everyone else," he admitted. "Who were you with?"

"No one," Alex admitted. The memory was a bitter one, although if he was telling the truth it would seem that the professional soldiers hadn't done much better. "I don't want to talk about it."

"It's over," the man insisted. "None of us are ever going to see the outside world ever again. What possible harm could it do now?"

Alex considered the point for a long moment. She didn't know who had betrayed her and she probably would never know. It was nice to think that Archer and the others would carry on the war without her, but the traitor might have betrayed them as well. And if that had happened, their resistance cell would have been blown open and destroyed. The supplies that Archer had guarded ever since 1940 would have been confiscated by the aliens.

"I don't want to talk about it," she repeated. She wasn't going to break, not after everything else she'd been through. "I need to rest."

"But they'll kill you," the man protested. "You can't help your friends now…"

Something clicked in Alex's mind. She'd been slapped and beaten and raped and, afterwards, she'd found it incredibly difficult to walk.

The man looked to have been tortured worse and yet he was still walking, if badly. They should have shackled him, yet they'd left him free to walk. And he didn't sound as though he was in pain…

"Go fuck yourself, collaborator," Alex said, wondering if it would be the last thing she'd ever say. He might lash out at her and she was in no state for a fight. "You're nothing more than a goddamned Walt!"

There was a pause, and then the man stood up and banged on the cell door. His limp seemed to have vanished, she noted, as the door opened and he was hauled outside. She could hear the sound of someone screaming from further down the corridor before the door was slammed closed and the light went off, leaving her alone in the darkness. Alex chuckled, despite the pain it caused her to laugh. They'd tried to trick her into talking and failed.

She lay back on the hard bed and closed her eyes, trying to relax. It wasn't easy; the pain kept her awake. She wasn't sure how much more she could take before she broke, even though she was determined to hold out as long as possible. But what was going to happen to her afterwards? She had a feeling that she wouldn't enjoy the answer.

The cell door banged open without warning. A dark silhouette appeared, standing against the faint light from outside. "Well, you're certainly posing an interesting challenge," the tall man said. He sounded more amused than annoyed. "I thought that you would have been fooled for sure."

It was a mistake to talk to one's captors, but Alex couldn't resist. "Fuck you," she said. "I won't tell you anything."

"I've already fucked you," the tall man said, nastily. There was a faint chuckle, an inhuman sound for all that it came from a human throat. "I come with good news. Your suffering will soon be over, my dear. Our masters have decided to execute a number of people caught in the act of waging war against the new world order. They announced it on the BBC and everything. And unless you talk, you're going to be one of the ones executed by firing squad."

He leaned closer. "You could talk right now," he said. "I'll have your wounds treated and you'd even be able to rest properly, without any more suffering. There are places where you could live out the rest of your life, far from the maddening crowd. All you have to do is tell us what we want to know…"

Alex braced herself, and then threw a slap at his face. But she was wounded and drained and she moved far too slowly. He stepped back, effortlessly avoiding her desperate blow.

"I suggest you make your peace with yourself, bitch," he said, in the same casual tone. "Tomorrow, you will die. And don't even think that they will care, all the people you're protecting. They will just

forget you, or forever wonder if you betrayed them…"

"Go fuck yourself," Alex said, as harshly as she could.

"I'll fuck someone else tonight," the tall man said. "Enjoy your last day on Earth."

The door banged closed behind him, leaving Alex alone once again. She'd known that there was a prospect of violent death from the day she'd first joined the RAF. And she'd known that she might be shot down over enemy territory and interrogated. It had been one of her few nightmares, back when the world had made sense. If only it had stayed in her nightmares… quietly, alone in her cell, she prayed to a God she hadn't spoken to for years. At least her death would have some meaning…

And perhaps it would be quick.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Alien Detention Camp
United Kingdom, Day 41

"I strongly suggest that you don't fuck up," Chris said, looking over at the lorry driver. It hadn't taken much to pigeon-hole their unwilling assistant as someone who could be threatened, although never fully trusted. "One mistake and they'll have us — and they will never believe that you weren't part of it."

Jimmy Coates nodded, clearly nervous around the soldiers and their weapons. The aliens had summoned three of their tame lorry drivers — and their vehicles — to the detention camp, a stroke of luck that Chris intended to use against them. Each of the lorries could hold upwards of twenty soldiers, along with some heavy weapons. The remainder of the assault force had positioned itself nearer the camp, watching and waiting for the balloon to go up. Chris had devised the plan, but right now — on the verge of implementing his plan — it struck him that there were too many things that could go wrong. If they fucked up…

"I'm going to be in the cab with you," he added. "If you betray us, it will be the last thing you ever do."

He bellowed for the soldiers to clamber into the lorries, and then nodded to Coates to climb into his cab and start the engine. Chris had ridden in army lorries before, but it had taken some careful work to prepare the civilian vehicles for their use. They weren't designed to carry passengers in the rear, let alone heavy weapons. Chris hadn't mentioned it to the lorry drivers, but if necessary they wouldn't hesitate to abandon the lorries and leave them behind. The aliens would know who had assisted the resistance, which would mark the drivers for death when they were caught. Their families were already safe and the drivers, assuming that they survived the mission, would be allowed to join them.

"Come on," Coates bellowed. "We need to get moving!"

Chris nodded and scrambled up into the cab. It was warmer than he had expected, smelling of something he didn't quite want to identify. Jimmy turned the key and the engine roared to life as Chris pulled on his seat belt and checked his Browning. He'd stashed a small bag of grenades and other surprises below the seat, out of sight of any alien patrols. If nothing else, the mission should convince the aliens that they couldn't rely on their tame collaborators — at least not completely. And Coates, a drunkard with a shrew of a wife, would go down in the history books as a hero.

The vehicle lurched into life and headed off down the road, followed by the other two lorries at a safe distance. Chris wasn't too surprised to see how empty the roads had become, even though the aliens had started doling out petrol to their collaborators. Most vehicles were driven by collaborators and they'd been targeted by resistance fighters — or just local youths — for destruction. Not many people picked on the aliens these days. The Leathernecks were clearly learning; not only had they improved their reaction times, but they didn't hesitate to blast nearby towns and villages in retaliation for attacks on their vehicles.

Chris gritted his teeth as the roar of the engine grew louder, thinking hard. How long could they continue to fight if the aliens retaliated massively for every little attack? They had plenty of weapons, but the aliens would simply keep wearing them down — and force the local population into more active collaboration. If they started warning the inhabitants of towns near their bases that any attack would result in the destruction of their town, the inhabitants might betray the resistance fighters to the aliens. Chris couldn't really blame them, even though it would make carrying on the war difficult. How could they keep fighting if they didn't have a real hope of victory?

The internet — passing messages from cell to cell — was clearly trying to keep their hopes up, but he could tell that the resistance was fraying at the edges. None of the lads had ever expected to have to fight a war in their own backyards and many had seen to their families, only to be rounded up by the aliens and shipped… where? It bothered him that they still had no idea what happened to human military personnel. There were hundreds of rumours, but none of them had ever seemed more than marginally likely. Perhaps they'd just been taken somewhere isolated and murdered. It was as likely as any other suggestion.

Once, the motorways had been jam-packed with traffic, making it impossible to move along at anything above a crawl. Now, from what he'd heard, those collaborators who drove out found driving almost pleasurable — at least while they weren't dodging rocks. He couldn't really blame them for that, even though he hated them for collaborating. The longer the country remained under alien control, the more and more people who would find themselves pushed into collaboration, or at least accommodation, with the aliens. And then…

There were parts of the country that had been used for military training and exercises for years, places where few civilians lived. The Scottish Highlands could hide a resistance force for years; indeed, the aliens seemed less interested in human activities above Dundee. They did have a small alien force in Aberdeen, but they hadn't bothered to

expand outwards or even start supervising the locals as closely as they did in London. It was reassuring to know that there were limits to their manpower, even though it was likely that they didn't consider the Highlands very important. He could go there and join the Scots Guards who were preparing their own fallback positions, or… maybe he would just carry on the fight until his luck ran out and the aliens killed him.

He glanced down at his watch. It was 1024. The executions had been scheduled for 1100 precisely. Apparently, the aliens were sending a number of bigwigs from London and the other occupied cities down to watch as they pumped bullets into captured resistance fighters, perhaps as a warning to anyone who would consider playing both sides of the fence. It was possible that Beresford himself would be there. Now *there* was a pleasant thought. If they had a shot at him, Chris intended to take it. Maybe it would teach the other collaborators not to sell themselves, body and soul, to the enemy of the entire world.

* * *

The light came on, shockingly bright.

"On your feet," a man ordered. Alex gasped in pain as strong hand grasped her legs and pulled them off the bed. A moment later, she was yanked to her feet and pushed against the cold wall while her hands were tied behind her back. Her two captors, both wearing the black masks that obscured their features, shoved her towards the door. Despite nearly falling onto her face, Alex found the masks rather heartening. They were clearly concerned about retribution from the resistance.

Outside, a number of other naked prisoners — male and female — were being pushed towards a flight of stairs leading upwards. Many of them were silent; others were crying out, begging for mercy from their masked captors. None of the captors seemed particularly impressed, although a few were taking advantage of the situation to grope the women in the group. Alex snarled at a man who grasped at her breast and he jumped back, clearly not having expected any resistance at all. The thought made her smile as she was pushed up the steps and out into the cold morning air. They seemed to be on the far edge of the alien detention camp.

She heard someone calling to her and glanced over towards the fences. Both the male and female camp populations were staring at the small parade, despite angry shouts and threats from their masked escorts. Alex wondered, absently, what had happened to the aliens.

Surely they would be watching while their human pawns abused their captives… or perhaps they were ashamed. Hadn't there been a fictional race of aliens who had discovered the Nazi concentration camps and destroyed them in horror? If only Earth had been invaded by those aliens. The war wouldn't have lasted longer than a few weeks and Earth would have won with ease. Unless the aliens managed to drop asteroids onto the planet instead of landing in force…

"Move, bitch," one of the guards snapped, pushing at her. Alex was tempted to fall to the ground and force them to carry her, but it was clear that there would be little point. The handful of prisoners who had been tortured so hard they couldn't walk were being dragged along the ground by their hair or feet. A pair of alien helicopters flew overhead, the sound of their engines a mocking reminder of everything she'd lost since the day her Eurofighter had been blown out of the sky.

They rounded what looked like a gym and came to a halt in front of the wall. A set of aliens were waiting for them, with a smaller group of humans standing nearby. They looked like collaborators to her, although some of them clearly looked as if they wanted to be somewhere — anywhere — else. She wondered if she'd recognise any of them from the parish council — maybe one of those politicians had betrayed her — but none of them looked familiar. There was no sign of Beresford or any of his inner circle. Perhaps the aliens felt that they'd seen the slaughter in London and didn't need another lesson in alien ruthlessness.

"Get them against the wall," one of the humans ordered. The guards obeyed, pushing and shoving at the prisoners to make them move. Two of the badly-beaten prisoners sagged to their knees as soon as they were pushed against the wall, unable to remain standing upright on their own two feet. Alex leaned backwards and relaxed against the wall, feeling oddly calm. The aliens would kill her and that would be the end. No more torture, no more suffering, no more desperate attempts to prevent her treacherous tongue from speaking aloud… it would be the end.

A cold wind blew across the field as the collaborators prepared themselves. Alex was suddenly very aware that the entire country was going to see her naked — somehow, she found herself chuckling at the very thought. She'd once broken up with a boyfriend because he'd wanted a naked picture of her on his mobile phone; absently, she wondered if that ex-boyfriend would be watching as the aliens blew her apart with their handheld cannons. Perhaps her death would inspire him to go out and kill a few aliens… or perhaps it would just terrify him into submission. She did her best to stand upright, despite the increasing pain from her legs and feet. One way or the other, it

wouldn't be long now.

* * *

"Here we are," Coates said. "They don't normally bother to look inside the lorry…"

Chris braced himself as they reached the alien checkpoint. After the suicide bomber in London, and a handful of copycats from all over Britain, the aliens had installed blast walls and double-fences to prevent any more suicide bombers from getting into their bases before they detonated their bombs. They'd done the papers properly, using MI6's forgery experts, but if the aliens decided to check the lorries anyway… they would have to fight their way into the base. The plan had been to rescue the prisoners and, ideally, give the aliens a colossal black eye. It would be much harder if they were caught outside the fence.

One of the aliens came stamping up to the cab and Coates passed him the papers. The driver was clearly nervous, although Chris suspected that it wouldn't be so obvious to an alien. Some suicide bombers in Iraq had given themselves away by being nervous as they neared their target… he glanced at his watch, noting that they only had ten minutes before the executions were scheduled to take place. A delay could ruin the entire plan. Carefully, he allowed his hand to drop down into his rucksack, where he'd concealed the grenades. If they had to fight their way into the camp…

The alien stepped back and waved one clawed hand. Coates wasted no time in gunning the engine and sending them around the blast walls, while the other lorries were checked and then waved into the base. Chris was almost disappointed at how easy it had been, although there was some evidence that this base wasn't really important to the aliens. They'd only flown a handful of their shuttles down to the base, while they kept flying them to the garrisons outside London and the base they'd built on the remains of Ten Downing Street and Buckingham Palace. He remembered, briefly, the friends he'd lost in the brief, but violent last stand of the Household Division. They'd be watching from the next world as he led a mixed group of soldiers and marines against the alien base.

According to a handful of collaborators who had maintained ties to the resistance, the aliens had two main detention camps and a number of buildings that served as their local headquarters. Several prisoners had been taken into those buildings and never seen again, although there was no clear explanation as to what had happened to them. The aliens, it seemed, maintained a human interrogation team

who interrogated prisoners of particular interest to the aliens. At least one of the interrogators had been identified as a particularly unpleasant sadist and murderer who had been serving thirty years in jail when the aliens had arrived. Chris gritted his teeth at the thought of anyone he knew falling into their hands.

History hadn't been a particular interest of his before the invasion, but he'd been reading about the French Resistance to Hitler. The French Resistance had been rather more low-key than it had claimed particularly after VE Day when the membership of the resistance skyrocketed, but it had had some successes. But it had also had problems with Frenchmen who threw themselves completely into serving the Nazis, as had the Russians and several other occupied countries. The locals had sometimes been worse than their foreign masters, having little or no regard for their own country. Some of the stories had been sickening. People had betrayed their fellows for food, drink, or merely some shelter in a world gone insane, but others had used it as a chance to play out their fantasies.

"Here we are," Coates said, nervously. The three lorries had parked near one of the human buildings. "How long do you want me to wait here?"

"I suggest you get out to the gate once the shooting starts," Chris said. Coates hadn't realised it, but the moment the aliens realised that they were under attack, they'd blast every human vehicle moving near the base. The only thing preventing them from dropping KEWs on their heads would be the presence of hundreds of their own people. "You know where to go to link up with our people."

He scrambled down from the cap and rapped on the back of the lorry. The first bunch of soldiers, wearing the brown uniforms that the aliens issued to their collaborators, opened the doors and jumped down, weapons in hand. If they were lucky, the aliens would start gunning down their collaborators, convinced that they had turned on them. And even if they didn't, they'd be confused.

"Come on," he said. The aliens didn't allow their collaborators firearms. They'd know something was wrong the moment they saw the SA80s and antitank weapons. "Let's go."

* * *

The problem with trying to make a defiant impression as one was waiting to be shot, Alex decided with a flash of humour, was that it took time for the enemy to get around to actually shooting. Their collaborators were busy making speeches, cursing the bitter-enders who felt that they had to carry on the fight even though it was

hopeless. After the first speech, a second had begun, followed rapidly by a third. The viewing public would be getting very bored by now, Alex told herself, wondering if there was something she could do to speed up the affair. It was growing colder and she was hardly dressed for the weather.

She caught sight of a group of aliens marching towards them, carrying their weapons at the ready. There was already one group of armed aliens with the collaborators, but perhaps the aliens had decided they needed two groups — or maybe three. What sort of threat did they think they were facing? They seemed almost laughably paranoid about their prisoners, even though they were tied and suffering the effects of torture.

"And so, it is with the deepest regret that we must execute those who feel that they must resist the new world order," one of the collaborators finally droned. Alex straightened upright as the aliens levelled their weapons, pointing directly at her head. Their bullets were larger than human-designed bullets, she'd noted, perhaps a testament to the tough leathery skin that protected the aliens from outside threats. "Their deaths will serve as a warning to those who feel that they can resist with impunity…"

Alex closed her eyes, expecting the shot to come at any second. Instead, she heard alien grunts of alarm. She opened her eyes, just in time to see a small band of armed collaborators advancing on the aliens. *Armed* collaborators…? The aliens, caught in the open, swung around, too late. Alex threw herself to the ground as the newcomers opened fire, mowing down the aliens before they could take cover or return fire. A handful of collaborators were shot in the legs, knocking them to the ground. Alex glanced up as a figure bent down and sawed the plastic tie away from her wrists.

"What…?" She managed. It was suddenly very hard to speak. "What's going on?"

"Isn't it obvious?" The man demanded. "You're being rescued!"

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Alien Detention Camp
United Kingdom, Day 41

Tra'tro Yak'shat had been studying his records when the attack began. The Detention Camp wasn't officially part of the Land Forces, although they provided the troopers who guarded it from insurgent attack. Instead, it fell under the purview of the Sha'ra, the intelligence service that safeguarded the State from enemies both inside and outside its territory. There hadn't been an intelligence network on Earth prior to the invasion — too great a chance of being discovered ahead of time, or so they'd said — and the intelligence officers were working overtime to build up networks they could use to hunt down human insurgents. It wasn't going too well.

The Sha'ra had wide latitude when it came to intelligence gathering, and he'd been told that he had no need to know any of the gory details, but he'd heard enough to gather that they were using human rogues to torture their prisoners and extract confessions. Anything was permitted in the service of the State — and if the humans were unwilling to dispose of their own rogues, they had only themselves to blame — yet he found it hard to accept that such torture was permissible. The humans seemed to be their own worst enemies. Even the Sha'ra had been shocked at some of the rogues they'd allowed to live. Using them in the service of the State was…

He jumped up as he heard the first explosion. The Sha'ra had ordered the execution of some of the prisoners — even to the point of bringing in their own executioners — and he'd been told to keep him and his troopers away from the execution ground, but explosions suggested that the base was under attack. The alarms sounded a second later, summoning the troopers to grab their weapons and repel the human insurgents. He picked up his own sidearm and ran towards the hatch. If the humans intended to attack his base, they'd get a few unpleasant surprises. He'd been careful to keep half his garrison under cover at all times, in the hopes that any human watchers would believe that he only had half as many troopers as he had. They'd be deploying now…

Outside, the sound of gunfire was alarmingly close. The humans were already inside the fence… how was that even possible? And he could hear the sound of human mortars lobbing shells into the base. Explosions flared up from where they'd parked their helicopters and the shuttle that had brought the Sha'ra execution crew down from orbit. The entire base shook, seconds later, as the fuel dump exploded,

blasting a colossal fireball into the air. Much of the base had been built to be fire resistant, but if the shuttle fuel had caught fire the prefabricated buildings would start to melt very quickly. Fire was already starting to spread over the grass the humans had used to mark out their runways. It wouldn't be long before the entire base went up in smoke.

He lifted his weapon, too late, as he saw a pair of humans running towards him. The weapons in their hands flashed fire… and he felt a brief moment of pain, before he fell down into darkness.

* * *

Chris saw antitank rockets smash into the guardpost, destroying the firing position before the aliens could bring their machine guns to bear on either side of the fence. The assault force outside had already taken out the other posts, allowing them to get close and start taking down the fence and push the blast walls aside. It would have been simpler to knock down the fence in a dozen places, but combat reports from America suggested that the aliens scattered mines between the two fences and they didn't have time to clear a path. Besides, it might be easier to get people out over the road.

"Get the prisoners moving," he bellowed. Sergeant Haywood heard him and started pushing the prisoners towards the gates. A second team headed towards the cages holding the remainder of the prisoners. Some of them prisoners looked as if they'd been beaten half to death, but they were all moving, if poorly. He'd have to assign people to help them get out of the base if they ran out of other options. "Get a team over and concentrated on the alien barracks!"

The aliens seemed to have had a number of troopers hiding in a large building that had clearly been designed to serve as a fortress. Chris watched as they fired from portholes, forcing his men to stay back. Whoever had designed the building knew what he was doing, he admitted to himself; the aliens could cover all of the possible angles of approach, except directly above their building. He detailed two platoons of Royal Marines to keep the aliens pinned down, while rounding up a platoon to follow him towards the human-designed buildings. If their intelligence was correct, the humans the aliens had been using as interrogators would be based there.

A small group of aliens had gone to ground behind a blast wall and were firing down towards the detention camp. Chris nodded to two of his men, who threw grenades over the blast wall and ducked for cover. Two shattering explosions tore through the aliens, sending bloody chunks of flesh flying everywhere. The alien body armour was

good, he noted, with a flicker of envy. Several of the alien bodies were intact, even though they'd been stunned or killed by the grenades. They put a bullet in each of the alien heads, just to be sure, as they reached the hanger. Inside, there was a small alien helicopter and a pair of aliens who had to be techs. They reached for weapons hanging by their sides, only to be shot down before they could draw them and open fire. Chris watched them fall and then glanced at the alien helicopter, wondering if they could fly it out of the base. A quick check revealed that it had been designed for beings with very different proportions than humans and it would be very difficult for a human to fly. Maybe two humans, with proper training… he pushed the thought aside as they ran towards the stairs. There was an entire underground complex underneath the hanger, one built back when the base had been preparing for war against the Russians. The aliens would probably have found it uncomfortable claustrophobic…

"Incoming," one of the sergeants yelled. Chris glanced up to see an alien helicopter swooping over the base, firing down towards the humans on the ground. A Stinger leapt up and slammed right into the alien craft, sending it heeling out of the sky and down to the ground, where it exploded in a massive fireball. "Sir…"

Chris unhooked a grenade from his belt and motioned for the soldiers to get ready. A second later, he hurled it down the stairs, where it exploded. He followed it down, weapon ready to deal with anyone lying in ambush, only to see nothing more than scorched walls, illuminated by flickering light bulbs. They moved down and started to check each of the small rooms one by one. Most were empty, but a couple held wounded prisoners and one held a man who'd somehow managed to bite though his own wrists and commit suicide. Judging from the condition of his body, he'd been tortured so badly that he'd thought that he was on the verge of breaking and decided to silence himself permanently. Chris would have liked to take his body out of the alien base and bury it somewhere properly, but there wasn't time. The aliens would be responding, even now, to the attack on their territory. How long would it take them to get reinforcements to be base, or decide to cut their losses and drop KEWs on their heads? The only thing keeping them from doing that was the aliens holding their building on the surface.

The final set of doors were locked, but Chris slapped an explosive pack against the doors and jumped back, allowing the explosive pack to blow the door off its hinges. Inside, there were five men, cowering under the table. Chris recognised two of them as people the aliens had recruited to serve as interrogators, which probably meant that they were *all* interrogators. He nodded to his men, who seized the interrogators, searched them roughly, and then bundled them back

towards the stairwell. They'd be taken back to the resistance base, interrogated themselves, and then executed. After seeing what they'd done to the prisoners, he had no room left in him for mercy.

A shuffling sound further down the corridor caught his attention and he unhooked his torch from his belt, pointing the beam of light into the darkness. Dark eyes stared back at him and he almost fired reflexively, before realising that the alien was unarmed. How could it even *be* in the underground complex? Chris wasn't claustrophobic, but he'd had to crawl through all kinds of tunnels at Catterick and the alien had to find the human tunnels proportionally worse than he'd found the drains he'd had to explore. It struck him a moment later that the alien had to be one of their intelligence officers. Who else would want to be so close to the interrogation rooms?

He pointed his gun at the alien's head and glared at him. "Can you understand me?"

The alien seemed to quiver, and then nodded. "You're coming with us," Chris said. "We won't hurt you as long as you behave yourself, understand?"

There was a pause, and then the alien nodded again. A student of humanity, perhaps? Human body language had to be alien to the Leathernecks, just as their own body language was almost unreadable to humanity. He looked at the alien's clawed hands and winced, inwardly. The last thing he wanted was the alien behind him with those natural weapons. He'd heard stories that suggested that the alien claws could cut through flesh and bone.

He jerked the gun upwards and the aliens shuffled to his feet. Chris stepped to one side and motioned for her to move towards the stairs and he obeyed, slowly. He couldn't tell if the alien was moving slowly because he was claustrophobic or because he was hoping that its fellows would come to the rescue. Chris poked the alien impatiently in the rear end and the alien jerked, before moving a little faster. His massive bulk blocked half the corridor.

"Get him to the surface and out of the base," Chris ordered, before peering through the remaining tunnels. The lighting was failing, suggesting that the base's emergency generator had been damaged in the fighting. Or maybe it was just designed to add to the effect. "We'll finish searching down here and then get up to join you."

The remaining rooms were empty, apart from one which had a pair of laptops and several large hard drives piled on one table. They were definitely human manufacture, which seemed rather odd — even though the aliens had been noted as having an interest in human computers and rounding up human experts they could put to work somewhere outside Britain. He picked them up anyway, remembering their intelligence sweeps through Taliban hideouts back before the

invasion, where they'd found all kinds of interesting information — and porn — on their software. The intelligence staff would study the laptops and determine if the interrogators had stored anything useful on their systems. Who knew? There might be videos of their interrogation sessions that could be played at their trial.

He glanced into the final room and blinked in surprise. The interrogators had turned what had once been a small kitchen into a chamber of horrors. A small pile of tools lay beside a hospital table, which was stained with blood and shit and piss. He recoiled, despite himself, wondering how anyone could get their kicks by torturing helpless victims. A cigarette lighter, a welding torch, a dental knife, a rattan cane, a pair of wire cutters… he could see how they'd used each and every one of them to break their victims. He felt sick, fighting down the urge to go find the interrogators and put a bullet through their brains. Even the Taliban hadn't been so unpleasant to their captives.

A glance in a cupboard revealed a small fortune's worth of cannabis and heroin, as well as some luxury foodstuffs that had been unavailable since the invasion. He couldn't tell if the interrogators had used them for themselves or tormented their captives with them, although he could see how they might addict someone to a drug and then leave the withdrawal symptoms as yet another form of torture. One compartment held booze, mainly the muck that various farmers were trying to brew in the absence of government officials to tell them not to make their own. Some of the bottles, however, were old enough to impress even the hardened officers in the mess. Chris couldn't imagine what the torturers had done with the booze.

"Splash the fuel around here and let's go," he ordered, harshly. He didn't quite recognise his own voice. Outside the room, back in the darkened tunnels, he could see just how easily the torturers could break their victims. They'd be able to convince them that the tunnels went on forever, that there was no hope of escape… the bastards must have been laughing as they enjoyed making people suffer. Perhaps they hadn't even produced results.

He unhooked a small bottle from his belt and splashed the contents around as they headed back to the stairs. The compound had been devised by chemists — it was a distant relative of napalm — but they'd never been allowed to use it in action. They'd followed the ROEs carefully when the world had made sense, yet they no longer mattered now. He pulled a small detonator from his belt as they reached the top of the stairs and tossed it down the shaft. It produced a spark which ignited the liquid, sending flames roaring through the underground complex. The torture chamber, the supplies the torturers had hoarded and the evidence of their grizzly task went up in flames.

By the time it burned itself out, it would have incinerated everything, leaving the aliens nothing, but ashes.

"Get the prisoners out to the RV point," he ordered, as he headed back out into the open. The sound of shooting grew louder from the direction of the alien strongpoint. They were merely keeping the aliens pinned down, rather than trying to kill them — and invite the aliens to bombard the base from orbit. "Have we emptied the wire?"

The aliens had established two detention cages, one male, one female. They'd cut through the wire once they'd driven the aliens back from the execution grounds, but several of the prisoners were too terrified to move. Others had started streaming out as soon as the wire had been cut, heading out to the countryside and hopefully away from the aliens. Chris had detailed men to round up the prisoners and take them to resistance hideouts, but if any of the prisoners wanted to go their own way, that was fine with him. The further they were spread over the countryside, the harder it would be for the aliens to round them all up again. He did hope that they were smart enough not to go home. The aliens and their collaborators would presumably have lists of who had escaped and where their families lived, assuming they has families.

He glanced back at the alien base and allowed himself a quick smile. They'd devastated the place. Many of the buildings were tough enough to take the flames without being completely wrecked, but they'd killed dozens of aliens and destroyed their interrogation program. And they'd even destroyed a handful of alien vehicles. No one was quite sure how long it would take for the aliens to get resupplied from their homeworld, yet it would throw a crimp into their invasion and occupation plans. And even *that* didn't take account of how badly their reputation would suffer. Once the news of the raid got out on the internet, resistance fighters all over the world would take heart and try their own attacks on alien bases.

"Sir," Sergeant Gravesend snapped. "I just picked up a flash message from the watchers. The aliens are on their way!"

Chris nodded. "Good," he said. "Let's see just how badly we can maul them this time."

* * *

Alex's entire body hurt, worse than anything she'd ever experienced, but she would have endured worse for the chance of freedom. One of the rescue party had passed her a coat which she'd used to cover her nakedness, yet she wouldn't have minded even that. Her feet hurt from the broken tarmac and grass they had to cross —

they didn't have any shoes — and she felt as if she was half-stumbling from the pain, but she kept moving. She wasn't going to allow this chance to escape because of the pain.

A burly man ahead of her was breaking the escapees down into small groups. "You're going with Group Five," he said, pointing to Alex, who nodded. Her heart was pounding like a drum, the rhythm seemingly echoing inside her head. Could she hear the sound of alien helicopters, or was it just her imagination? "Follow Wilson there and don't slow down. The Leathernecks are on their way."

She caught sight of a pair of bound men being pushed along by some of the soldiers and realised, with a burst of unholy delight, that one of them was the tall man who'd tortured her. The thought kept her moving, even as the sound of alien helicopters grew louder; there would be a chance for revenge. Maybe she could torture him herself, if he proved unwilling to talk… she pushed the thought aside, disgusted at herself. And yet it had a seductive appeal…

"Keep running," Wilson snapped. "You're not safe yet!"

Alex bowed her head and kept moving.

Chapter Thirty

Alien Detention Camp
United Kingdom, Day 41

The line of alien tanks moved with astonishing speed, racing cross-country towards the detention centre. Chris watched them come through a pair of binoculars, noting that the tanks had outraced their troop-carriers they'd presumably been supposed to be escorting. But the aliens trapped in the detention camp had presumably been screaming for help ever since they'd realised that the only thing keeping them alive was their value as hostages. The aliens would want to save their lives, if possible.

His original plan had been a quick smash and grab; get into the base, free the prisoners and then start running. The resistance commander, insofar as the resistance had a commander, had modified it into a better mousetrap, reminding him of stunts the Taliban had pulled during the early years of the war in Afghanistan. They'd been fond of attacking one place to lure a relief force into a trap, but they'd always paid highly for it. Chris had wondered if the resistance was likely to make the same mistakes, yet he'd been overruled. Besides, planting IEDs was all very well, but it wasn't spectacular enough to be inspiring.

"Sir," Maxwell called, "I have their overhead drone in my sights."

Chris nodded. No one was entirely sure just how capable the alien drones were, but the Americans had designed and produced fantastically capable platforms before the invasion, ones capable of tracking individual fighters and dropping Hellfire missiles on their heads. He had to assume that the aliens were just as capable, even though they didn't seem to be designed to operate in a threatening environment. But then, few Taliban fighters had ever had working Stingers. The briefers had commented that possessing such a weapon would make someone a Big Man — and if they fired the missile, they wouldn't have the weapon any more, would they? It had struck Chris as absurd, but they had clearly had a point. The aliens, facing people less concerned with their tribal status, had lost a number of drones to handheld missile launchers since the invasion had begun. But why hadn't they started to take better precautions?

He looked back towards the alien tanks. They'd be within engagement range in a matter of seconds and they all had to be taken out quickly, or they'd be lethal once they realised that they were under attack. Their main guns would be useless against insurgents, but they all carried heavy machine guns and their armour could stand off

bullets and even grenades. The gangs in London, according to the internet, had thrown petrol bombs at the aliens, but the alien tanks had simply shrugged the blows off and kept on coming. Their soft-shelled vehicles were easier to disable or destroy.

"Fire," he barked.

Maxwell launched his Stinger upwards towards the alien drone, while the antitank teams fired on the alien tanks. Chris saw a flash in the sky from where the drone had been hit, moments before four of the alien tanks exploded. The fifth ground to a halt and sank to the ground — the rocket had struck the underside of its carriage — but returned fire with its machine guns. Chris cursed as two of the antitank teams were wiped out before they could fall back, while the remaining alien vehicles slowed down and started deploying their troopers. He watched the alien shapes emerging from cover and swore again. They were going to be on him faster than he had planned.

"Fall back," he ordered, raising his voice to be heard over the sound of the tank's guns. The aliens seemed to be shooting at random, raking the ground near their position. He wasn't sure if they were having targeting problems or if they were just trying to keep the humans pinned down. "Fall back to the next line."

Crawling through mud wasn't fun, but it beat being shot in the back by alien machine guns. The second set of surprises had been positioned along the route they assumed the aliens would come, yet the aliens had managed to get there before it was quite ready for action. He slipped down into the half-dug trench — any protection was welcome on a battlefield — and grasped his rifle, looking for targets. The alien infantry were still advancing, more carefully now that their tank was no longer providing cover. Chris wondered what was going through their minds, before realising that it probably wouldn't be that different to what went through his mind when he advanced on an enemy position.

He glanced upwards and cursed as he saw a trio of alien aircraft roaring overhead. The aliens didn't deploy aircraft with the same enthusiasm as NATO had — they could drop rocks from orbit — and seeing them now was a surprise. They swept low over the ruined base, firing rockets at anything that looked remotely dangerous. Chris saw an explosion billow up from where two of the Royal Marines had been positioned and knew that they were both death. A Stinger chased one of the alien aircraft as it headed into the distance before coming around for another run, but the aliens dropped flares and the missile, decoyed away, exploded harmlessly.

"Grenades, then run," he yelled, unhooking the last of his grenades from his belt and pulling the pin, before throwing it right into the alien position. The others followed suit, and then started to

crawl away, using the explosions to cover their departure. Unless the aliens got very lucky and guessed that they were starting to retreat, they should hesitate long enough to allow the fighters to lose them. He reached for his radio and keyed it once, sending a simple message to the other two positions, and then abandoned it. The aliens would zero in on its position and drop a bomb on him.

The grenades shook the ground as they scrambled away, keeping their heads down. Outside the detention camp, they'd had a chance to scope out possible ways to retreat, including two that led through villages the aliens had ordered abandoned by their human residents. There was plenty of cover for resistance traps and they'd set up several IEDs, enough to keep the aliens carefully sweeping for more while the fighters made their escape. Several men had volunteered to make a last stand in the houses, but Chris had vetoed the idea. They needed every man they could get and futile stands would only cost them lives for nothing. The aliens could simply fall back and hammer the houses from orbit.

He heard the sound of alien aircraft overhead and instinctively sought cover. The ground shook a moment later, a colossal explosion that sent a fireball roaring into the air. God alone knew who or what the aliens had seen, but they'd certainly killed it. He kept moving, knowing that there was no longer any point in trying to fight. They'd split up into smaller groups and meet up again at the RV point.

There was a brief burst of firing, not too far away, followed by silence. Chris wondered briefly what had happened, but it hardly mattered. Assuming that the aliens believed that their men were still in danger, they would have gone to liberate the camp first and then give chase to the resistance fighters. Or perhaps they would simply drop rocks from orbit on the deserted villages, hoping to trap some of the resistance fighters in the blasts. It struck Chris as excessive, but the aliens probably regarded it as efficient. But then, they'd never know for sure how many they'd killed.

Shaking his head, he kept moving. There was a long way to go before he could relax and start heading towards the base. He'd have to be careful that he wasn't followed, either. The aliens might be holding back deliberately, hoping that he would lead them to a base. That was the last thing the resistance needed.

* * *

U'tra The'Stig knew that he wasn't supposed to lead relief missions in person, but many of his subordinates were either inexperienced in fighting humans or too low-ranking to be given

overall command responsibilities. With the new access his promotion had granted him, it was alarmingly easy to see just how badly the humans had mauled the Land Forces — and caused them to bring in reinforcements earlier than the planners had expected. The humans might not be the most advanced race the State had ever encountered, but they were certainly the most stubborn. A sensible race would have started seeing what niche it could carve out for itself in the State by now.

The detention camp had been devastated. They'd blown through the gate, despite the blast walls that were supposed to prevent anyone from getting in without permission, and somehow secured much of the base long enough to cut through the cages and release the prisoners. Most of them would have been in no state for running, but they wouldn't have been given much of a choice. Even so, he could see a number of dead humans who clearly weren't insurgents, unless the insurgents had decided to fight while naked. The prisoners had been shot down in the crossfire, probably by their guards.

He watched as the remains of the base's garrison stumbled out of their barracks. At least they'd managed to hold out — although he had a feeling that they'd been left alive deliberately, if only to prevent higher authority from cutting their losses and dropping rocks on what remained of the base. The superior officer, an intelligence officer, came over and glared at The'Stig, before snarling orders for him to track down and kill the human insurgents. The'Stig tapped his badge, a droll reminder that he actually outranked the intelligence officer, and waited for him to calm down.

"They've destroyed all our work," the intelligence officer said, finally. "We were using humans to track down other humans and they've destroyed our work!"

"They do that," The'Stig agreed. The intelligence officers had a reputation for arrogance, but they did produce results. "I'm deploying my unit to hunt for the humans. I expect you and your unit to stay out of my way."

Ignoring the intelligence officer's splutters, he ordered his mobile command post set up in one corner of the ruined base. They were already deploying drones and attack aircraft to support the Assault Units on the ground. If the humans had managed to go to ground, they might be able to smoke them out before the operation was called off. Given the recent events in America that had forced the redeployment of several Assault Units and Security Units, it was quite possible that the humans would manage to hide. But they'd certainly do their best to rattle the humans as they fled.

* * *

"What the hell do we do with this guy?"

Chris looked over at their single alien prisoner. The alien didn't seem to be doing anything deliberately to slow them down, but there was no denying that his bulk made it harder for them to hide from the advancing alien patrols. Chris had climbed a tree and seen several aliens advancing in their general direction, hunting for human fighters. There was an IED nearby, hidden in their path, but the aliens had become much better at spotting and neutralising them over the past few weeks.

"Cut off his clothes and leave them here," he ordered, finally. It was possible that the aliens had hidden tracers in their clothing. Chris would have, if he'd been in their shoes. "And then we get him to the safe house and hope that they haven't tracked us."

It was the first time he'd seen one of the aliens naked and he had to admit that he was curious. Their captive's leathery grey skin seemed to shift unpleasantly over his bones, almost as if the alien had lost a great deal of weight recently. There was no sign of any sexual organs, between the alien's stumpy legs, but judging from what looked like coiled muscle under the skin the sexual organs had actually retracted into the body. Human penises did tend to shrink if the human was nervous, yet it looked as if the aliens didn't deploy their penises unless they were aroused. He found himself trying to envisage how they would mate before deciding that it hardly mattered. They could answer that question once they were safely away from the aliens chasing them.

"Come on," he ordered. "Let's go."

Fifteen minutes later, they seemed to have broken contact with the main body of the aliens, but Chris still felt uneasy. The skies seemed to be crowded with alien aircraft, some clearly hunting for the escaping insurgents, others flying down towards the base. One of them was blown out of the sky by a missile, but its comrades launched rockets towards the missile's point of origin. Chris hoped that whoever had fired the missile had abandoned the launcher and run the moment the missile had been launched, yet he suspected otherwise. The aliens had reacted with alarming speed.

The sound of alien aircraft slowly tailed away, leaving only the occasional sound of helicopter chopping their way through the skies. Chris kept glancing upwards anyway, wondering if they were being watched by a drone. No one knew for sure how good alien sensors were, but the Americans had performed miracles. The aliens might be just as good, or they might have stolen American technology — or perhaps they'd pressed Americans into service as collaborators. Many of the reports they had from across the Atlantic were confusing, or contradictory. People had welcomed the aliens, some said, while

others claimed that the entire country was at war. But America had far more land surface to hide resistance fighters. Maintaining a resistance in Britain was growing harder by the day.

He looked over at the alien, stumbling his way through the undergrowth, and wondered just how he felt about being a prisoner. How many humans had the aliens taken as prisoners — and just what were they doing to military prisoners? Perhaps their captive knew the answer to those questions. They'd have to ask him, once they found a secure place to keep him — did he even know how to speak English well enough to answer complex questions?

Shaking his head, he kept walking — and silently prayed that they weren't being tracked from far overhead.

* * *

"Maz'Bak is missing," the intelligence officer said. "We have been unable to locate his body."

The'Stig looked down at the remains of the underground interrogation chamber. The humans had burned it, incinerating everything they hadn't taken with them. They'd left nothing, but ashes behind. It was quite possible that a body had been burned so completely that it would need a full DNA sweep to prove that it had been there, but he could see the intelligence officer's point. A missing trooper would be bad enough — the humans could do anything they wanted to him — yet an intelligence officer was far worse. He would know details that needed to be kept from human ears.

"The humans have largely made their escape," he said. It wasn't a pleasant thing to concede, but given how quickly they'd had to respond to the disaster, it was almost unavoidable. Small parties of troopers were still out in the gathering darkness, hunting for the humans, yet he'd had to pull most of his force back to the base. The drones might just pick up humans trying to move under cover of darkness. "If they had your officer with them…"

It wasn't a pleasant thought. An adult Eridian had a brighter heat signature than a human, but if the humans were careful there wouldn't be anything for the drones to detect. They'd already figured out weaknesses in some of the sensor networks surrounding Land Force Bases — did they know, perhaps, that the Assault Units had inferior night vision equipment to the devices the humans had invented? And if they had an intelligence officer to interrogate…

"I insist that you start searching for him at once," the intelligence officer said, angrily. "The loss of one of my people is a catastrophe of the highest order!"

Particularly for his career, The'Stig thought, with a certain amount of private amusement. He'd have to keep that to himself — intelligence officers made nasty enemies, even if they were outranked by Land Force officers — but it was funny. The intelligence officer would have to explain why they hadn't taken more precautions, or vetted the human collaborators more thoroughly or… they'd be blamed for the entire disaster. Losing an entire detention camp, to say nothing of the propaganda victory that had just been scored by the human insurgents. Someone would have to take the blame.

"I will detail units to continue the search," he said. It would be straightforward to push blocking forces forward, although he had the feeling that the humans would successfully evade contact. They'd had plenty of time to plan their retreat. "I suggest that you start thinking about what your officer could tell the humans. Who knows what they will do to him to make them talk?"

He'd heard rumours about how the intelligence service was conducting its interrogations, ugly rumours. The humans certainly wouldn't hesitate to retaliate in kind, once they learned the truth. And it would only stiffen their resistance. If they had enough Assault Units to tie down most of the country… but they didn't. They'd have to call in reinforcements from the rest of the world and that wasn't going to happen. Earth had already absorbed far more Assault Units and troopers than the planners had believed necessary.

The Command Triad would have to make some decisions, sooner rather than later. Perhaps if they pulled out of some parts of the world and left them to rot, they'd be able to return later, once the humans had finished killing each other off. The Middle Eastern humans had unleashed nuclear weapons on each other. Who knew what the British humans would do?

Chapter Thirty-One

Resistance Hideout, Near Coventry
United Kingdom, Day 42

"Well, you've been through the wars," the doctor observed, cheerfully. "Let's have a careful look at you, all right?"

"Let's not and say we did," Alex said. Her body still hurt, even though she'd had a good meal and a proper sleep once they'd evaded the alien pursuit and found their way to a resistance base near Coventry. "I don't want anyone to look at me ever again."

"I need to examine you if I am to prescribe treatment," the doctor said, patiently. "I'm sorry that I'm the only doctor here, but…"

"Never mind," Alex said. The original owner of the house had left a dressing gown behind when they'd abandoned their property for the illusionary safety of the countryside. She shucked it off and climbed onto the examination table, wincing as she saw the bruises covering her body. The interrogation team had seemed more interested in hurting her than actually dragging information from her unwilling lips. "Get on with it."

"Lie flat," the doctor said. He started by examining the bruises covering her chest, including a nasty one right across her left breast. "They hit you with a cane, I presume?"

Alex nodded. "Canes can break the skin, which is why some people use them for S&M frolics," the doctor observed. "There's an extra layer of danger as the cuts can become infected and cause greater hardship down the road." He studied the cuts in view and relaxed a little. "There's no sign of any infection, but I'm going to give you some cream to rub on them every night before you go to bed. It should encourage faster healing."

"They lashed my feet as well," Alex said. She couldn't keep the bitterness out of her voice. "Do people do that for fun as well?"

The doctor snorted. "There are people who choke themselves nearly to death for the thrill it gives them," he said. He studied her feet carefully. "Luckily, your feet weren't too badly damaged — I expect they wanted you to be able to walk under your own power. A couple of the wounded we plucked from the alien base were hamstrung — the bastards cut the nerves in their ankles, making it impossible for them to walk properly. It's hard to tell if they were being paranoid or sadistic. Roll over for a moment."

Alex obeyed, tensing as she felt his fingers working their way over her back and buttocks. "I can't see any infection," the doctor said, after a moment. "I think you've been very lucky. The disgraceful

conditions in that camp would have meant that you would have picked up something, sooner or later. A number of the prisoners from the main detention cages have been suffering vitamin deficiencies, of all things. We don't have the resources to treat all of them here, so we've had to spread them out a bit and hope that the aliens or their collaborators don't realise what we've done."

His hands grasped her buttocks, pulling them apart for a moment. "There's far too much scarring down here," he said, grimly. "How many times did they rape you?"

"I can't remember," Alex admitted. It was shameful, but no amount of thinking could unlock the puzzle. She should have remembered. "Why don't I remember?"

"They gave you a mild drug in your food," the doctor said. "I took a blood sample last night and found traces of a particularly obnoxious date rape drug. My guess is that they were working to break down your resistance by disorientating you — it probably would have worked, given enough time." He winced. "Turn over and let me have a look at you from the other side."

Alex had always been embarrassed when her sexual organs had been examined, even by a female doctor, but she submitted without complaint. "I assume that you weren't a virgin when you fell into their hands?" The doctor asked. Alex flushed, but nodded. Her first time had been nothing to write home about, although it had gotten better over the weeks that had followed. "There's quite a bit of scarring down here — I don't see any signs of any STDs, but I don't have the equipment to do proper tests. I'm going to give you a course of antibiotics and I expect you to take them for at least a month."

He shrugged. "Normally, we would have sent you for counselling as well, but we don't have any of the trained specialists here," he added. "I spent half my time as a civilian GP referring people for counselling who didn't need it and now there are more trauma cases on my hands than I ever saw in my worst nightmares."

"It's tough all over," Alex said, as she sat upright. It still hurt to move, but it was getting better — or maybe she was just getting used to the pain. Her hands shook as she reached for the dressing gown and she found herself having problems picking it up. The doctor gave her a sympathetic look and helped her stand upright. "I… why don't I feel balanced?"

"Delayed shock," the doctor said. "I've seen it quite a bit in military and police personnel. You keep plugging onwards while the crisis is going on and then you start coming to pieces. My advice, my very strong advice, would be to rest for the next few weeks. You don't need to spend any time on the front lines…"

"The entire world is on the front lines," Alex pointed out, dryly.

“What happens if the aliens come crashing in here and demand our immediate surrender?”

“Try and relax,” the doctor said, with a faint smile. He hesitated, briefly. “One other thing. I’d strongly recommend that you refrain from sexual intercourse for the next month or two, at least while you’re taking the antibiotics. You really need to let your body heal before you do anything else.”

“I don’t think that that’s going to be a problem,” Alex said. She caught sight of herself in the mirror and scowled. Her blonde hair had been hacked off by a manic, her face was bruised and covered in tiny cuts and what little of her legs could be seen had been marked by the cane. “No one’s going to be interested in me for a few weeks anyway.”

The doctor shrugged. “I’d suggest refraining anyway,” he said. “I should warn you — some people putting out propaganda on the internet want to use your story to embarrass the collaborators. They will certainly want to talk to you about it, maybe have you filmed talking about it or take pictures of your wounds. If that bothers you, tell them to go to hell. They captured enough footage from the interrogation chamber to thoroughly embarrass the collaborators without needing your input.”

Alex looked up at him. “Footage?”

“The bastards recorded all of their interrogations,” the doctor said. He looked sick, even at the mere thought of it. “I saw a handful of them when they wanted a medical opinion. My considered opinion is that they were torturers first and interrogators second. At least one of them was supposed to be locked up in jail for the rest of his life. One of their sessions was the slow murder of a young girl with no real connection to the resistance. God alone knows what they did with the body.”

Alex remembered some of the reports from London. “The aliens had their prisoners dig pits and they simply dumped the bodies there,” she said. “Maybe there’s another pit near the detention camp. The girls in the cage told me that quite a few of them had died while they were in alien custody.”

The doctor shrugged. “I’d suggest telling that to the review team,” he said. “They may want to go back and look.”

He looked her up and down, and then nodded. “I’ll have the antibiotics and cream sent up to you,” he added. “We don’t keep them all here, for obvious reasons. And then I strongly suggest that you get plenty of rest.”

* * *

Outside, she met a young man who was wearing civilian clothes, but carried himself with a military bearing. “I’m Gus,” he said, with a faint smile. “I was wondering if you would be willing to discuss your time with the enemy with me?”

Alex blinked in surprise, even with the doctor’s warning. Part of her wanted to forget the entire experience, but the rest of her knew that telling the entire world could serve as a warning to other resistance fighters not to get caught. Or perhaps they’d be too scared to resist the aliens when the time came. But that would be their choice — and besides, perhaps talking about it would help her get over it. The headshrinker who’d visited the squadron after they’d lost a pilot to equipment failure had certainly believed that that was the case.

“If you wish,” she said, finally. “I’m afraid I intend to ask as many questions as you.”

Gus led the way into a large room that had once been a living room, with a sofa, a plasma television and a computer placed against the wall. “We have been going through the recordings taken by the collaborators,” he said. He nodded towards the television, which was showing a frozen scene from one of the recordings. Someone — Alex was relieved to see that it wasn’t her — was being whipped. Blood was dripping off his back and down to the ground. “Some of it is for propaganda, but the rest of it is for building a case against them. We have them as prisoners, you see.”

“Shoot them,” Alex said, sharply. She remembered the girl who had tried to help her, after her first session with the torturers. And the others, only half-remembered in the haze her memory had become, who’d been there. “Is there any fucking doubt that they deserve to die?”

“None at all,” Gus said, seriously. “But we intend to put together a series of videos for the internet that will prove them guilty, before we execute them. There’s been quite a bit of debate over the issue, I’m afraid.”

Alex snorted. “They chose to serve the aliens,” she said. “What excuse is there for their actions? They weren’t pushed into collaboration and they didn’t have any noble motives — they wanted to indulge their fantasies. And they did.”

She shuddered as she remembered the feelings of helplessness that had almost broken her, the awareness that she had lost all control over her body. Alone in the dark, she had come far too close to breaking, to begging them to listen to her as she spilled everything she knew. Who knew what might have happened if they’d been allowed to keep working on her for longer?

“We have to prove that,” Gus said, quietly. “And we need your

help to do it."

The next hour passed slowly. Alex watched one of the videos the torturers had recorded, fighting down the urge to be sick. She hadn't even been the worst-treated person in the underground complex. Two men had been sawn apart by their tormentors, while a girl had been practically raped to death. She told herself that she was right, that the torturers had been more interested in hurting people than learning anything the aliens could use, but it was no mercy. How could anyone indulge themselves by torturing helpless victims?

Alex had known how Third World countries treated their prisoners. She'd always known that being shot down and landing in enemy territory was a possibility. Saddam's regime had had entire corps of torturers, many of whom were nastier than the people the aliens had found and put to work. Iran and Saudi Arabia tortured dissidents and democrats with equal abandon, but they were both barbaric states. The thought of anyone in Britain willingly torturing someone was horrifying. And it was so pointless!

She recorded a brief interview with Gus, where she explained what had happened to her and how she'd been rescued from the firing squad. Gus proved to be a surprisingly good interviewer, although as an army intelligence officer he'd probably been trained to talk someone into revealing more than they intended. He replayed it for her and she was struck by the sense of hopelessness she saw in her eyes. The video would be put out on the internet and the entire world would see her. She'd never wanted to be a film star, but it was worth it if it turned hearts and minds against the aliens.

"So," she said, finally. "What happens to me now?"

"You recover," Gus said. He paused, just for a moment. "Did you hear about the Area Commanders the aliens have been creating?"

Alex shook her head. After she'd been arrested and sent to the detention camp, she hadn't heard anything new from the outside world. The last she'd heard was that the aliens were handing out seeds and expecting the farmers to plant them and raise crops before the onset of winter. Maybe they could, but Smith hadn't been too confident of it.

The thought reminded her of her friends. "What happened to the others from the camp?"

"The ones we got out are scattered over the country," Gus said. "Most of them will go into action units once they've recovered from their ordeal. I'm afraid we don't keep records here…"

"For fear the aliens will capture them," Alex said. Al Qaida had been notoriously good at keeping records, too good. Documents uncovered by raids on their hideouts had often led to more hideouts. "Who are the Area Commanders?"

“Senior collaborators,” Gus said. He picked up a folder and placed it in front of her. “From what one of our sources says, they’re going to be responsible for integrating Britain’s economy with the alien empire. We believe that the aliens are doing something similar in America and France, but we don’t have any confirmation. I was wondering if you recognised any of them.”

Alex opened the folder and skimmed through the photographs. None were familiar, apart from one she vaguely remembered as having been an MP during the Expenses Scandal. A note beside the photograph claimed that he’d volunteered for alien service, rather than being press-ganged into unwilling collaboration by the aliens. She put the photo to one side and glanced down at the next — and swore.

“That’s Rupert Leigh,” she said, in shock. He’d been one of the few who’d known who she was, and what she had been before the invasion. And he’d known about the resistance movement she’d led even though he hadn’t been an active member. “He…”

It clicked in her mind. “He betrayed me!”

“Almost certainly,” Gus agreed. “From what we have been given to understand, Leigh was offered a chance to rule the entire county — in exchange for his service to the aliens. He probably was the one who betrayed you, along with several others. He’s marked down for death if we ever get a clear shot at him.”

“I want to go after him,” Alex said, sharply. “You cannot deny that I have the right to kill him…”

“Maybe, but that doesn’t mean that you should,” Gus said. He held up a hand before she could say anything. “The doctor said that you should rest — so rest. There will be time to kill the traitor afterwards.”

* * *

The underground chamber was cold, illuminated only by a single overhead light. Chris strode into the chamber and stopped in front of the five chairs positioned in the centre of the room. The men sitting on the chairs had been cuffed to render them immobile and hooded to make sure that they saw nothing, just in case they managed to escape and run back to the aliens. Besides, being blind was disorientating and demoralising. Chris hadn’t enjoyed it during his training and he doubted that any of the collaborators would have enjoyed it either.

He reached for the first hood and pulled it off, revealing one of the alien torturers. The man stared up at him desperately, but the ball someone had stuffed in his mouth prevented him from speaking. Chris

removed each of the hoods in turn, revealing the remaining torturers and collaborators. They had all featured in the videos they'd recovered from the alien detention camp. There was no doubt whatsoever about their guilt. Chris had watched the videos himself, just to prepare himself for the task ahead.

Quickly, he pulled his own facemask on and looked up at the cameras. "Start filming," he ordered. The set of cameras within the chamber came to life, recording the five faces — and Chris, standing behind them. They wouldn't see his face behind the mask. "Each of you has been found guilty of collaborating with the alien occupiers and of torturing your fellow humans for your masters. The evidence has been placed on the internet, there for all to see. For your crimes, there can only be one penalty. The sentence is death."

He lifted his Browning and put it to the head of the first torturer. The stench of shit arose as the man fouled himself, suddenly realising that the game was truly up. Chris felt nothing as he pulled the trigger, putting a bullet through the man's brains. The torturer had deserved far worse than a quick death. He moved to the second torturer, remembering the videos he'd seen that were now firmly burned into his mind. The man had gloried in watching helpless people screaming in pain. He pulled the trigger a second time and watched as the man died, bound and as helpless as his victims.

The remaining three were less guilty, but they'd definitely been involved. Chris shot all three of them and then stepped back to allow the cameras to film their dead bodies. The video would be uploaded to the internet tonight and then the entire world would see what had been done for the aliens — and what had happened to those who had done it. Maybe the next set of collaborators would be less willing to torture their captives…

Shaking his head, he walked away from the chamber, leaving the bodies behind. They'd be buried when night came, left to rot in an unmarked grave. And that, he hoped, would be the end of it. He didn't want to have to do it again.

Chapter Thirty-Two

North England
United Kingdom, Day 44

The alien had been placed in a large holding cell, with foodstuffs that had been liberated from one of the alien bases by a collaborator who had ties to the resistance. It — no, Gavin reminded himself, *he* — had been well-treated, with the intelligence crew's best guess at the kind of environment the aliens would find comfortable. Given the temperature of their buildings, they seemed to prefer a sauna rather than the open air. The alien certainly didn't look uncomfortable, although there was no way to know for sure. He didn't seem to speak English properly without his voder, but there was no way they could risk bringing it to their hiding place. The aliens might have been able to track it down.

"I doubt that we will ever be able to talk their language properly," Linux reported. They were standing together in front of the monitor, watching the alien and two of the intelligence team experimenting with a prototype translator. "Their mouths and ours are just too different. We'd have better luck trying to speak fluent pig."

"I've known a few intelligence operatives who claimed that they spoke fluent donkey," Gavin said, wryly. "Can we ask him questions?"

"Once the techs have finished, I think so," Linux said. "We copied their translation programs onto a pair of laptops and started working away at it. I think there will probably be quite a few glitches, but on the whole we have something that should work fairly well."

Gavin nodded, looking down at the reports from the pair of doctors who had examined the living alien. Most of what they said tied in with the reports from the handful of aliens who had been dissected around the world, but there were some interesting additions. The alien seemed to have undergone some form of surgery at some time, yet it seemed cruder than anything humanity had devised for itself. Their best guess was that the aliens actually seemed to be able to take more punishment than humanity, but any serious injuries healed slower than comparable damage to a human. It didn't make much sense to Gavin, yet the doctors seemed convinced that it fitted in with what they'd observed about alien behaviour.

Added to the files they'd pulled from the alien computer network, they'd also been able to identify different ranks, at least for alien soldiers. Their military appeared to be strictly top-down, without any of the special arrangements human forces made for their Special Forces, although their intelligence service — which appeared to be

completely separate from the military — had no formal rank structure. Gavin suspected that they were missing something, if only because that little datum didn't seem to fit in with the rest of the alien structure. But their intelligence service might not keep its files on the general system, if only because they would fear hackers from Earth.

The two technicians finished working with the alien and left the chamber, leaving the alien alone in the heat. He seemed to prefer bright light, even at night; the technicians had shown him knobs that he could twist to adjust the light and heat to whatever he considered natural. Some of the researchers had wondered if the alien homeworld was permanently illuminated — they'd come up with all kinds of models to demonstrate how a habitable world could float at the gravitational point between two stars — but Gavin suspected that the alien simply didn't want to be in darkness. He was alone, miles from any of his own kind — and light years from home. If humans could get uneasy being only a short distance from their own kind, how would an alien feel when the distance to his homeworld was something unimaginable?

He stepped into the chamber, one hand half-covering his eyes against the glare. He'd had to leave his Browning outside the chamber, leaving him feeling oddly naked. The alien's heaving mass was stronger than him, although he could move quicker if he had to dodge the alien's grasp. One of the laptops had been left on the bench, proofed against damage caused by the humidity. He picked it up and sat down facing the alien. Dark eyes looked back at him. The alien seemed to be taking his captivity well, all things considered. Humans would probably have been bouncing off the wall by now, demanding release.

There was a note on the screen waiting for him. *The alien's name is Maz'Bak*. Gavin read it quickly and then looked up at the alien, Maz'Bak. No one really understood how the alien names went together — if there was a forename and a surname, or if there was some other way they constructed their names — but it was an issue that would hopefully be addressed once the war came to an end. Who knew? Perhaps they could force the aliens to accept something less than total conquest of Earth. And the key to unlocking many mysteries was right in front of him, breathing heavily. Up close, there was a faintly musty smell around the alien. It wasn't entirely pleasant to the nose.

He tapped the laptop, bringing up the translation program. "My name is Gavin," he said. The translation program produced a number of grunts, followed by his name. It was clearly smart enough to recognise that there was no direct translation of Gavin. "I am here to ask you some questions."

The alien made an odd motion with one hand. It seemed almost a shrug.

"Start with the easy question," Gavin said, dryly. "Why are you here?"

There was a pause, and then the alien grunted back. "I was captured by some of your men and transported away from my people," the laptop said. Gavin had to smile. "They brought me here and put me into the care of your doctors."

"That isn't what I meant," Gavin admitted. There was something almost simplistic about the alien's reply. He had to remind himself sharply that the translation program would be simplifying things as much as possible, perhaps editing out some or all of the meaning in the process. A *Star Trek*-style universal translator would have been very useful. "Why have your people invaded Earth?"

The alien grunted, several times. Gavin listened carefully, but as far as he could tell it was just grunts. The subtle points were impossible for humans to hear. "This world is in an important location for us," the laptop said. "We chose to claim it to forestall others from claiming it."

"Interesting," Gavin observed. "So you have enemies? Races on the same level as yourselves?"

The alien said nothing.

Gavin looked up at the dark eyes. "We have videos of what your human allies were doing to your prisoners," he said. "We could attempt to force the information from you."

"And then the State will extract its revenge," the alien said, through the laptop. Gavin had to admit that the alien had a point. The aliens were in a position to extract revenge, simply by bombing human population centres. "Your world is ours because we were strong enough to take it from you. We do not understand why you did not climb into space and secure yourself from races like us. And yet there is much about you that can be added to the State. Your race is a wealth of knowledge for your superiors."

Gavin glanced at the laptop, suspiciously. He'd tried primitive translation programs before in Afghanistan and they'd never really impressed him. If the alien was speaking truthfully — and the translator was working perfectly — the aliens had taken Earth because they could, rather than any desperate need for real estate… unless their mysterious enemies had wanted to take Earth and the Leathernecks had wanted to get there first. It struck him as oddly primitive, but it tied in with other statements the aliens had made since the invasion had begun. They didn't bother coming up with elaborate justifications for their actions. They just did what they thought needed to be done.

“You’ve been rounding up military personnel and computer specialists,” he said. “What happens to them?”

The alien seemed to rock forward, slightly. “We intend to use your knowledge to enrich ourselves,” he said, finally. “Your computer specialists will assist us in creating the next generation of warship computers, giving us an edge over the…”

Gavin frowned. The laptop had declined to translate the final grunt. If that was the name of their enemy… it did make a certain kind of sense. They had an enemy out among the stars, maybe more than one. And human computers were generally better than alien designs… of course they would want to add human technology to their warships. It would be an unpleasant surprise for their enemies when they restarted the war.

In fact, he could think of several other things the aliens might want. Ever since HG Wells had written a story about invaders from Mars, humans had been writing vast science-fiction epics that explored all kinds of fictional technology. But the aliens didn’t find it fictional — they already had some kind of FTL drive, even if their computers weren’t up to human standards. What if they started to implement ideas humans had devised into their warships, or their tactics, or…? There were thousands of possibilities. Maybe tactics from *Star Wars* could be used, or *Babylon 5*, or even *Doctor Who*.

“So you’re taking the specialists away from Earth,” he said, slowly. There were thousands of reports of people just taken away by the collaborators, leaving friends and families behind. They would never know what had happened to their missing relatives, not unless the aliens deigned to tell them — and it seemed unlikely that they would even understand the human need for closure. “What are you doing with the military personnel?”

The alien said nothing.

“Oh, don’t give me that,” Gavin snapped, angrily. “We know that you have captured thousands of British and American military personnel — and we assume you’ve done the same everywhere you’ve landed. What are you doing with them?”

He stared up at the alien’s dark eyes. “We need to know,” he said, quietly. “Where are our soldiers?”

“They have been taken off-world,” the alien said, finally. His bulk seemed to quiver, just for a second. “They will serve the State on the disputed worlds. As subjects of the State, it is their duty to serve as the State decrees. They will fight for the State or die.”

Gavin blinked in surprise. “You’re expecting them to fight for you?”

“Of course,” the alien said. “Their world is in our claws. We own your planet now and your people exist to serve the State. Your

military personnel will be expected to take the disputed world or lose the right to return to their homeworld."

"I see," Gavin said. "And most of them will die in service to the State?"

"To die in the service of the State is a great thing," the alien said. Gavin stared down at the translator, convinced that there had to be an error. How could the aliens have developed such a society — and at the same time, developed FTL drives that had allowed them to spread out into interstellar space? For all he knew, someone had *given* the aliens FTL technology — or someone had landed on their homeworld and they'd captured their starship.

But then, what would have happened if Hitler had won World War Two? There would have been a fascist state, with children indoctrinated into believing Hitler's warped racial theories from birth — theories that would have been 'proven' by the Nazi victory. How long would it be before someone decided to question the fascist state's nature? And if they'd all been brought up to believe that genocide was acceptable in the name of the state, who among them would even question?

A few years ago, he'd read a book about the American South — and how slavery had been an integral part of society. They'd *known* that blacks were inferior to whites, which had played a large part in keeping society ordered, rather than have the poorer whites realise just how badly they were being screwed by their social superiors. And generations of children had been raised to believe that blacks were inferior… it had taken generations and a civil war to start the long task of changing their minds, and the scars were still present when the Leathernecks had invaded Earth. How long would it be before some Leatherneck version of William Wilberforce raised his voice to challenge the ruling party?

"One final question," he said, finally. "How can we get you off our world?"

The alien seemed almost amused by the question. "You can't," he said. "Earth belongs to the State."

* * *

"We have been bouncing questions off him for some hours," the intelligence officer reported. She was a slight woman, barely strong enough to get through the army's basic training before being streamlined into intelligence. "I'm afraid that most of what he told you, General, seems to fit in with what else we know about them. They came, they saw and they conquered Earth."

She tapped her laptop and the display changed. “We now know more about how they’re organised,” she continued. “At the time, there’s a Command Triad; three officers, one from the Land Forces, one from the Space Forces and one from their intelligence service. Below them, there are Land Force Commanders who serve as the principle officers on the ground — we have one assigned to Britain, there are several assigned to the United States and at least three assigned to Europe. Below *them*” — she tapped the laptop again — “there are a number of units assigned to the various Land Force Commanders. Apparently, we’ve been bleeding them pretty hard and they’ve had to shift units around fairly regularly on fireman drills.”

Gavin smiled, despite his tiredness. Earth might be tiny by interstellar standards, but she was still a pretty big planet and most of the regional theatres were separated by large bodies of water. The aliens might have upwards of two million soldiers in their conquest force, yet it was nowhere enough to hold down the entire planet. But they didn’t really *need* to hold down the entire world. The fighting in the Middle East, the chaos sweeping through Africa, the mass slaughters in the Balkans and Central Asia — the humans were still fighting each other, even when there was a more dangerous threat in orbit. It might not have been that important — the aliens were perfectly capable of bombarding parts of the planet they didn’t need into submission — but it would have been nice to think that humanity could unite against a common foe.

Linux looked up from where he’d been sitting. “We’re fairly sure that we could take their command network down for some time,” he said. Gavin nodded, remembering when it had been first proposed. “But it would only work once. After that, they would start isolating their systems and making it impossible to take them down again.”

Gavin snorted. “I still don’t understand why they even offered us the chance to do it once.”

Linux smirked. “How many people really know what happens inside a computer?” He asked, clearly remembering his pre-military days. “Every time a person’s identity is stolen by a hacker, it happens because someone was careless or ignorant and left the front door to their computer wide open. People use the same passwords for different computers, even though they should know better. Do you know how I broke into the Pentagon’s computers?”

His smile grew wider. “One of their officers used the same password for accessing their computers as he did for buying stuff on Amazon,” he explained. “I cracked one password and then I had access to all of his Pentagon files. And that was someone who really should have known better. I’d be surprised if the alien troopers know anything about what happens inside a computer. They certainly don’t

seem to be interested in telling them anything more than they need to know."

"Maybe we should hold off for a few years and let them absorb our computer systems," Gavin mused. "And then we could take down their entire system at one fell swoop."

"Unless they're complete idiots, they will take precautions," Linux pointed out. "I would — if I had human specialists working for me."

Gavin shrugged. "And so we go back to the old problem," he said. "The aliens are in a position to bombard us into submission. Even if we take out their forces on the ground, we would still be knocked back down and forced to surrender."

"Maybe we could find a way to contact their enemies," Linux said. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Gavin had been giving that some thought. "I don't see how," he admitted, finally. "Unless we can build an FTL communicator…"

"They don't have one," Linux said.

The door burst open as one of the operators ran into the room. "Sir," he said, "there's an important broadcast on the BBC. You have to see it!"

Gavin followed him back upstairs, leaving a pair of soldiers behind to keep an eye on the alien. The broadcast was already repeating when he reached the dining room, where two of the staff had been monitoring the BBC. He was mildly surprised that the aliens hadn't bothered to put out their own version of the attack on the detention camp, but their propaganda efforts seemed feeble, almost uninspired. Their collaborators weren't quite working as hard as they should.

Alan Beresford's face appeared on the screen as the message started again. "I have been informed that the bitter-enders have taken one of our alien friends captive," he said. The collaborator-in-chief sounded as if he sincerely believed every word he said, although that was a necessary skill for a politician. "They have informed me that they no longer intend to allow the bitter-enders to frustrate Earth's admission to the galactic state. Therefore, if this captive is not released, a large number of humans will die."

He leaned forward. "I understand that change always worries those who do not want to see any change in how the world is run, but I appeal to those who are still fighting the aliens," he added. "They are not bluffing. Unless the captive is released within two days, they will take punitive measures against a city on the British mainland. Please, for the love of God, release the captive before millions die."

Chapter Thirty-Three

London
United Kingdom, Day 45

The entire city had gone crazy.

"Damn it," Robin yelled, as he ducked to avoid a hail of rubbish being thrown at them from the flats. "Where the hell is our backup?"

"Caught up in their own riot," Sergeant Wiggin shouted back. They'd entered the East London housing estate looking for a suspected resistance organiser. And then the entire estate seemed to have exploded around them. The alien threats against a human city had triggered off a whole series of riots. "They're stuck for the moment!"

Robin gritted his teeth. The housing estates had been slowly decaying into criminality for years, despite programs designed to give the inhabitants pride in their community. They were notoriously unfriendly to the police, even before the invasion. Their police car had been tipped on its side and they'd had to flee into an alley in the hopes of escaping the crowd. It was apparently worse along the outside of London, with humans desperate to escape the city clashing with police and alien guards equally intent on keeping people in. The internet had named a hundred different cities that might be targeted and they'd all gone crazy.

Outside, there were over five hundred youths, probably all members of the same gang. The gangs had been defending their territory ever since the invasion, even though they were drawing food and drink from the aliens. If they were waiting before giving chase to the policemen, it suggested that they were expecting others to arrive and fall into the same trap. Or maybe they were just biding their time. Robin wished, once again, that the aliens had allowed them to carry firearms. The crowd outside was better armed than the police.

He looked around and saw a drainpipe leading up to a window. Quickly, before he could think better of it, he ran over to the pipe and scrambled up it. It was a harder climb that he'd expected, but the crowd outside the alley was a powerful motivator. He managed to push the window open and fall face-first into the flat, gasping for breath as the stench of death reached his nostrils. Someone had been using the flat to smoke drugs, but had overdosed — or perhaps it had been a murder. Judging from the condition of the body, it had been at least a fortnight since death had taken place. He leaned back out of the window and waved frantically to Wiggin. Wiggin was older and fatter than Robin, but with a little help he made it into the flat.

"Jesus," he muttered, as he tried to avoid breathing. "What the

fuck happened here?"

"No idea," Robin said, shortly. He glanced around the flat as they came out of the bedroom and up to a bolted door. Someone had attached no less than five bolts to the door, making it much harder for anyone to enter without breaking down the door. Drug dealers tended to be paranoid, not without reason. Their list of enemies didn't stop at the police. "I bet you that the back door outside is blocked off too."

"That's a fire hazard," Wiggin said. They shared a droll look as they opened the door. It didn't smell much better outside. An overpowering stench of urine almost sent them staggering backwards. Robin had never been able to understand how anyone could willingly live in such a dump, although he had to admit that most of them never stood a chance. The gangs were simply too powerful for ordinary people to overcome. Who would bother cleaning the stairwell if they knew it would simply be vandalised again within the week?

Robin glanced outside through a broken window and saw that the mob was getting stronger. There was little hope of anyone coming to help on the ground, unless they were armed and willing to cut down enough of the gang members to convince the others to flee. It wouldn't be long before they decided to go after the two trapped policemen — and it wouldn't take their leaders long to guess where Robin and Wiggin had fled. He glanced down at the crowd again before heading up the stairs. There should be a way to get onto the roof from the stairwell.

The stench seemed to grow stronger as they raced up the stairs. Robin had made arrests in places like the estate before and knew that the closed doors hid all sorts of crimes — and people living their lives of quiet desperation. A drug dealer, a prostitute and her pimp, terrorists, racists… all hidden behind closed doors. The BBC might prattle on about the benefits that alien rule would bring to the country, but he doubted that any benefit could help those trapped on poor estates. Very few people born and bred on such an estate ever managed to climb out and build a proper life for themselves. The pressure just to sink into criminality was overpowering. There were some girls who were grandmothers at thirty, assuming they lived so long.

At the top of the stairs, he glanced up and saw the hatch leading to the roof — and a small set of metal climbing handles. Quickly, he climbed up and pushed at the hatch, before making the mistake of looking down. Dizziness almost overcame him, but he closed his eyes and pushed at the hatch again. It opened and fell to one side with a loud bang, almost as loud as a gunshot. He scrambled out onto the roof and peered out over London. A dozen fires were burning brightly

in the distance, towards the centre of the city. He could hear the sound of alien weapons being fired, suggesting that the rioters were trying to take out the alien patrols. Maybe they'd even succeed…

"Call for a helicopter," he ordered, as Wiggin scrambled up beside him. Peering over the side of the building brought on another fit of vertigo, but he managed to overcome it long enough to realise that the crowd had realised that its hostages were missing. They were thronging around the block, looking for trouble. "Tell them we need an emergency pick-up right now."

He closed the hatch and dragged a number of fallen bricks over to make it difficult for anyone to reopen it from inside the building. The rioters had probably used the rooftop as a place to defend their territory in the past, throwing bricks down towards their enemies. Wiggin joined him and between them they stacked up nearly fifty bricks. It would be almost impossible for someone to open the hatch, Robin told himself, and hoped that he was right. After their escape, the crowd wouldn't be feeling merciful to the policemen if they caught up with them.

The sound of helicopter blades grew louder and he allowed himself a moment of relief as a police helicopter came into view. A rope ladder was already falling down towards them as it slowed and came to a hover directly over the estate. The sound of the crowd grew louder as Wiggin took hold of the ladder and started to scramble up into the helicopter. Robin heard a series of bangs and thuds from under the hatch that suggested that someone was trying to push the hatch open and come climbing out onto the roof. He took tight hold of the rope ladder and climbed up himself, following Wiggin. The helicopter seemed to bank in the sky the moment he reached the top and was helped into the cabin, tilting away from the estate and heading back towards Central London. From overhead, entire streets seemed to be jammed with rioters, or protesters. He could see riot teams unleashing CS gas on some mobs, while leaving others to shout themselves hoarse. It looked as if London was dissolving into chaos.

"They want every available officer out manning the barricades," the pilot called, as they flew lower. "The Leathernecks are moving up forces from outside the city. If we don't put the rioters back in their box, they're going to start mowing them down!"

Robin wasn't alone in believing that more vigorous policing and less politically correct bullshit would do more for the city than any amount of urban improvement schemes, but there were limits. And the aliens wouldn't hesitate to gun down thousands of humans to convince the remainder to do as they were told. He sat back and covered his eyes as the helicopter slowly came in to land at the makeshift New Scotland Yard. They'd be expected to go back out on

the streets at once and he didn't know if he had the energy. All he wanted to do was crawl into a bottle and die.

* * *

"Well, mighty master of all you survey," Catherine said, dryly. "I think that some people are a mite upset."

Alan Beresford ignored her. The new seat of government for the collaborators was a small fortress, protected by the aliens. It said something about how effective they were at dealing with urban mobs that no one had risked attacking them, even though the deadline for the return of the alien captive was counting down towards zero. But the remainder of London didn't have that immunity to the chaos gripping the city. The entire city seemed to be out of the streets, trying to get out or to take down an alien or two before it was too late.

"You might have done better not to tell the world about the threat," she added. "Just think about how long it is going to take to clear up the mess…"

"Shut up," Alan snapped. He didn't want to let her get under his skin, but there were limits to what he was prepared to endure. Catherine was preparing herself to challenge him and perhaps become the next Prime Minister — and tool of the aliens. "You know as well as I did that there was no choice."

The aliens had made their feelings quite clear. They wanted their kidnapped officer back — and they were prepared to threaten mass murder to be sure that they got their way. Alan knew them well enough by now to know that they weren't bluffing. In fact, he wasn't sure that they had the ability *to* bluff. They seemed to prefer the simplest and most direct way of doing things possible — and if that meant a great many humans got hurt, they didn't seem to care. Alan might have admired their ruthlessness if he hadn't been all too aware that they would turn on him if he stopped being useful. And his usefulness might just have run out.

Alan had managed to get most of the city's workers back to work, particularly ones who could help the aliens administer their new territory. The registration process had identified a vast number of people who could join the alien government and work overseas, perhaps in France or America. Alan had calculated that the aliens wouldn't want to bring in locals if he could produce servants, even if they would be at risk from the local resistance fighters. But now most of his civil servants seemed to have gone on strike, or were being hunted down by mobs in London. The rest of the country wasn't much

better. Every city or large town that didn't have an alien ring of steel keeping the population trapped was emptying out into the countryside, spreading panic and disorder over the entire country. It wasn't as if they could all be fed outside the cities.

He glanced down at his watch. Two days, the aliens had said; two days for their kidnapped officer to be returned or else. And one of those days was nearly over. If he'd had a link to the resistance, he would have begged them to return their captive, if only because his usefulness would expire if the aliens decided that he'd lost control of his people. But there was nothing he could do, apart from waiting and hoping. It had been a long time since he'd prayed.

Catherine walked up behind him, looking out over the darkening city. "Do you remember when we thought that we were in control?"

"We will get back into control," Alan said, flatly. He was not going to let her rattle him. They were on the verge of losing everything — if the aliens bombed a city, it would be the end of his provisional government — and the damned woman was making a power play! "The resistance will release their prisoner."

"But how do you know?" Catherine said. "They might just believe that chaos is better for their goals than a country under your foot."

Alan prided himself on his self-control, but the woman was driving him insane. "And what happens if the aliens decide to administer the country themselves?" She asked. "What use will they have for us then?"

A hot flash of anger boiled through Alan's mind. He slapped her, right across the face. She staggered backwards, one hand raised to the ugly red mark where he'd struck her. Alan stepped forward and slapped her again, knocking her to the floor. He bent over her and put his hand on her throat, ignoring her feeble attempts to push him back. A sense of dark power roared through him as he stared down at her. He could do anything to her; rape her, choke the life out of her… and who could stop him? The old order had died the day the aliens had landed in Britain and the rest of the world.

"You will do your fucking job or I will kill you," he hissed, finally. Part of his mind pointed out that it would be unwise to let her live, but the feeling of triumph overruled it. "Now get out and find a way of convincing the sheep down there to go back to work nice and peacefully."

He took his hand off her throat and stepped back, half-expecting her to lunge at him. Instead, she pulled herself to her feet and walked towards the door. Alan watched her go and then turned back to the window, shaking his head. He'd mounted a tiger when he'd made his bargain with the Leathernecks. They didn't care how he ruled the country, provided that he ruled it for their benefit. But the moment he

stopped being useful, they'd kill him.

Outside, the fires were growing brighter. Alan watched, feeling cold despair replacing the exultation he'd felt when he'd humbled the bitch. If he stopped being useful…

"Damn you," he muttered, knowing that no one would hear him. "Why did you have to go and spoil it?"

* * *

"They shot up a crowd as they headed to Whitehall," one of the resistance fighters said. "At least thirty wounded, fifty dead — should I have them forwarded to here?"

"Only if you get me more supplies," Fatima said, tiredly. She'd been working like a demon, almost non-stop since the riots started to tear London apart. Hundreds of wounded had been brought in, passed across her table and then sent somewhere to recuperate. Many of them wouldn't survive, no matter what she did. They needed a proper hospital and one wasn't available. "Didn't Joe get some from the nearest hospital?"

"Only a few," the fighter said. "They're inundated with wounded too. We're trying to slip some of our own into their system, but if they're not registered…"

Fatima nodded, and then yawned. Tiredness caused people to make mistakes — and yet she hadn't been able to get any rest since the day had begun. She wasn't the only medical doctor in the resistance, but the others were scattered out over the city; like her, they were fighting to keep people alive who really needed proper treatment and a hospital…

She yawned again, feeling the room spinning around her. Had it only been last year when she'd taken the last two weeks of Ramadan off because she had worried about what would happen if she grew too hungry? What a joke! She'd worked herself half to death over the last few days and now she could barely keep herself together.

"Bring them in," she ordered, tiredly. Her last patient, someone who had been shot through the shoulder by one of the alien bullets, would probably never recover the use of his arm. One of the soldiers had commented that the aliens seemed to use elephant guns, something that made sense given how tough they were. Ordinary ammunition wasn't quite good enough against Leatherneck skin. "I'll have a look at them as soon as I can."

"You'd be better off getting a nap," a new voice said. She looked up to see Abdul. "You look too tired to work properly."

"I feel dead." Fatima admitted. She hadn't seen Abdul in days,

ever since he'd brought her to the first of the makeshift hospitals. From what she'd heard, he'd been too busy organising attacks on collaborators and the alien patrols. "Can you have someone else take care of the patients?"

"I'll do my best," Abdul promised. He hesitated. "I think you need at least five hours of sleep, so get to bed and stay there. We'll wake you up if we have to vacate this place in a hurry."

Fatima looked up at him, nodded, and then stumbled into the next room. God alone knew what it had been originally intended for, but they'd set up a cot for her beside the window. Outside, she could see fires in the distance. London was burning — absently, she wondered if someone on the other side would realise that the resistance hadn't set any fires near its hideouts. But judging from the chaos, the collaborators had too much else to worry about before they started hunting the resistance again. They'd have to put out the fires, calm the rioters and — if the aliens carried out their threat — provide help to a destroyed city and its stricken population.

She closed her eyes and felt sleep overcome her.

Chapter Thirty-Four

North England
United Kingdom, Day 46

"There isn't any question about it," Gabriel said, flatly. "We're going to return the alien prisoner."

He held up a hand before Brigadier Gavin Lightbridge-Stewart could say anything. He'd come to the Prime Minister's hiding place despite the security risks, because it was one conference that they couldn't trust to the internet. The Leathernecks had a great many human computer experts in their hands now, people who could presumably track messages through the internet and locate their destination. Gabriel found their dependence upon messengers and carrier pigeons oddly ironic, given the circumstances. The longer the war continued, the more primitive the resistance would become.

"I know that the alien represents a treasure trove of valuable information and biological data," he continued, "but keeping him isn't worth a few million human lives. We can shove him out somewhere and one of their patrols can pick him up."

Lightbridge-Stewart frowned. "There are complications, Prime Minister," he said. "The first one is simple; if we give in to their threats, we create a precedent. If they feel that they can threaten us into submission, they will use it again and again, blackmailing us into surrendering our only hope of carrying on the fight. What would you say, a week from today, if the aliens threaten to bombard London or Edinburgh or Newcastle if you don't surrender yourself to them?"

Gabriel hesitated. "I'm aware of the risks," he said, flatly. "Doesn't the fact that they haven't threatened mass bombardments suggest that they don't intend to push it that far?"

"They may not have believed that it would work," Lightbridge-Stewart countered. "From what we have been able to draw from our alien friend, we know that humans are often more barbaric than the Leathernecks — we're certainly a lot better at justifying inhuman treatment to ourselves. If we give them proof that it will work, they may try it again. Where do we draw the line and say where we will no longer allow them to threaten us into submission?"

"But this is one point where we have to make a decision," Gabriel snapped. "We have an alien prisoner — and they want him back. Now, do you think that keeping that alien a prisoner is worth the loss of God knows how many of our own civilians?"

He pressed on before Lightbridge-Stewart could say anything. "And what happens to our reputation if we refuse?" He asked. "How

many of our own people will turn against us after we lose an entire city?"

"The entire planet is at stake," Lightbridge-Stewart said. "What decision we make here and now will have an effect on the entire world. What if our captive can tell us how to contact the other intelligent races out there? What if we could get help from someone who could take out the alien starships hovering over our heads, poised to bombard us into submission if we rebel?"

"But we don't know that we could," Gabriel said. "We have the insight into their computers — maybe we can get the information some other way. I won't put so many lives at risk because we have one captive. The dangers are just too great."

He looked the military officer in the eye. "Correct me if I'm wrong," he added, "but am I not the ultimate civilian authority?"

Lightbridge-Stewart didn't hesitate. "You are, and if you want to order him released, I will carry out the order," he said. "However, there are other complications. Moving something the size of the alien cross-country will not be easy. Wherever they find him, they will certainly suspect that he was concealed somewhere nearby and start searching for him. There is a distant possibility that they might come here."

"It's a risk we have to accept," Gabriel said. He glanced at the television. The volume was down, but the BBC had helpfully displayed a ticking clock counting down the seconds to when the alien ultimatum ran out. He'd watched images of desperate rioters battling the police and the aliens, or fleeing out across the countryside like locusts. Others had boarded small boats and set sail for Ireland or the Scottish Islands, where the aliens hadn't bothered to establish a presence. They might find safety there. "We can abandon this building if necessary."

"Yes," Lightbridge-Stewart said. There was a long moment when they both contemplated possible futures. "I can see to his release, if that is your command."

"It is," Gabriel said. "Please see to it."

* * *

"Did I do the right thing?"

Sergeant Butcher shrugged. The three SAS men stayed close to Gabriel, while a small unit of soldiers were outside, maintaining a secure perimeter. Gabriel was rather surprised that the aliens or their collaborators hadn't bothered to investigate the old manor and register the people staying there, but Haddon Hall had been off the

official radar for many years. The owners having ties with the security services had advantages for them. Gabriel would have been surprised if they even got taxed.

"I don't think that there was any right answer," Butcher said, after a moment. He looked down at the board for a long moment. All of the three SAS men played Chess and Gabriel had found it a good way to relax. "You have to make the decision and then stick to it."

He moved a piece forward and smiled, thinly. "I used to serve in Africa on missions that officially didn't exist," he added. "The locals really didn't trust their own governments — not without reason. If there was a foreign interest willing to spend big bucks on bribes, the governments would roll over and use troops to clear away the locals if they got in the way. I don't think you could afford developing a reputation as someone willing to throw British lives away for one alien."

Gabriel frowned, considering the board. "And what happened to most of those unlucky people?"

"The radicals would arrive and start convincing the people that the only hope was to fight," Butcher said. "And most of them wound up being slaughtered while the government disguised effective genocide by claiming that it was waging war against radical Islam. There are some truly shitty places out there, boss. Even worse now that the aliens have smashed anyone who might have been able to impose order by force."

He shook his head as Gabriel moved another piece forward. "Checkmate," he said, moving his queen into position. "You're getting better, sir."

"Thank you," Gabriel said, dryly. "You're masters at unarmed combat, sneaking about… and Chess?"

"There was a trooper up at Hereford who was a five-star chef," Butcher said. Gabriel couldn't tell if he was being serious or joking. "And there was a little old woman who knew absolutely everything about plants and kept massive greenhouses. Every six months, a dozen lads from Hereford would gather around this tiny old lady and learn what they could safely eat in the wild. She never had any problems with vandals either. I wonder why."

Gabriel opened his mouth, and then looked up as the butler entered the room. "Pardon me, sir," he said, "but the Brigadier has returned from his trip. He is waiting for you in the library."

"Good," Gabriel said, standing up. Butcher moved ahead of him, watching for assassins lurking in the corridor. Gabriel had tried to talk his close-protection detail out of being so paranoid, but Butcher had pointed out that the aliens had human collaborators who might be more adroit at tracking him down. Haddon Hall's small staff had just

had to get used to the three men watching their every move. They were all security-cleared, positively vetted, yet none of them had expected to be suddenly living in an occupied country. Gabriel hadn't expected it either.

Lightbridge-Stewart stood up when Gabriel entered the library. "We got the consignment underway," he said. The alien was on his way back to his people, then. "I wanted to discuss a possible operation with you, while I was here. My staff have been putting together a plan we've entitled Operation Hammer."

Gabriel frowned as he took his seat. The Americans loved bold and purposeful operational names — Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom — but the Ministry of Defence preferred to assign names at random, on the grounds that anyone who heard the name wouldn't automatically know what it meant. Using a purposeful name was unusual and it suggested that someone intended for it to become public sooner rather than later.

"The core problem, Prime Minister, is that we cannot prevent them from moving wherever they please — and, if necessary, bombarding us into submission," Lightbridge-Stewart said. Gabriel nodded, concealing his impatience. "They have the ability to hit us wherever they want, put bluntly, and it cripples our ability to mount a sustained insurgency. We need to show them that we are not going to roll over for them and surrender."

"Particularly after we returned their captive," Gabriel agreed. "How do you intend to hammer the message into their heads."

"We can cripple their command and control network," Lightbridge-Stewart said. "Maybe not for very long, but we can bring it down long enough to mount a series of attacks on their bases — and the collaborator government in London. At the very least, we would force them to fall back and rebuild their collaborator force from scratch. We might even give them enough of a bloody nose that they pull out of Britain altogether."

"I doubt they will feel inclined to surrender," Gabriel said, dryly. "It's much more likely that they'll take a step back and hammer us from space."

"It's possible," Lightbridge-Stewart agreed. "The problem, however, is simple; do we take advantage of the one chance we are likely to get to hurt them, and smash their collaborator government, or do we surrender the initiative to them? We know they've been working on building networks for controlling our civilians and putting them to work on alien projects. How long is it going to be before the last resistance fighters are pushed to the Highlands, or the North Yorkshire Moors, or…"

Gabriel nodded. "We're stuck," he said. "We can keep irritating

them, but if we piss them off too much they might just decide that they're better off without us."

"Maybe not," Lightbridge-Stewart said. "We were talking to the alien captive about them committing genocide — about them wiping out the entire human race. From what we were told, they can't — there are interstellar laws that prohibit genocide."

"There are *human* laws that prohibit genocide," Gabriel pointed out. "I don't recall anyone actually stepping up to the plate and stopping the slaughter in Sudan. The laws aren't enforced, so…"

He shrugged, remembering how frustrated he'd felt before the aliens had landed and shown him just how helpless many people in undeveloped countries must have felt over the years. It was easy to get governments to condemn genocide, but much harder to actually convince them to *do* anything about it, no matter how clear-cut the case for intervention. He had no doubt that they could have stopped the slaughter in Sudan or any of the other stricken countries in Africa, yet the cost would have been horrific and there was no hope that anyone else would pick up the tab.

"Apparently, the interstellar races do enforce the laws," Lightbridge-Stewart said, slowly. "There's no law against invading a planet that can't defend itself, it seems, but there is one against deliberately causing a genocide. That's something we can use against them."

"They can kill a hell of a lot of us without committing genocide," Gabriel pointed out, sourly. Dear God — had he ever wanted to be Prime Minister? One less scandal and he might have died in London when the aliens landed, or perhaps found himself drafted into the collaborator government. The entire weight of the world rested on his shoulders. "How sure are we that the aliens wouldn't exterminate us?"

"I think we are reasonably sure," Lightbridge-Stewart said. "But they will certainly push back hard when we start pushing them."

"True," Gabriel said. They needed a victory. They needed something they could use to inspire resistance all over the country. And after the aliens had forced them to surrender their captive, they needed one desperately. "I authorise the operation."

He hesitated. "And I hope to God that we're not making a terrible mistake," he added. "The aliens won't hesitate to hammer us if we push them right out of the country."

* * *

Tra'ti Gra'sha kept one eye on the countryside around him as his small patrol skimmed down the human road, looking for trouble. It all

looked peaceful, apart from the handful of birds flying through the air, but the undergrowth had been known to hide all kinds of surprises over the past few weeks. The humans were past masters at burying an IED and using it to hit a patrol, and then bringing in armed bands to catch the survivors before they had a chance to escape. Some of the Land Forces patrolling the ground around their bases had taken the opportunity to burn as much as they could of the local foliage, making it impossible for the humans to use it as a hiding place.

The armoured vehicle slowed as the driver caught sight of a group of animals blocking the road. Gra'sha hefted his weapon, alert for trouble; it wouldn't be the first time that some enterprising human had used animals to block a patrol's route while preparing an ambush. The driver had similar thoughts and turned the vehicle onto the embankment, relaying on the hover-cushion to keep it upright and moving. A fence splintered as the vehicle brushed against it, but they ignored it and kept moving. The humans knew better than to complain about their damaged property. If they wanted to keep their property and their lives intact, they could stop harbouring the rogues who ambushed patrols.

He heard the sound of the animals protesting as the vehicle skimmed past them and back down onto the road. A pair of young humans — females, judging from their increased frontal development — jumped back in shock, clearly not having heard their approach until it was far too late. Gra'sha resisted the temptation to wave in their direction, knowing that they would probably be planting bombs or taking shots at him in the next few years. At least this bunch of humans seemed reluctant to send their young to war. There were tales of human children carrying bombs right up to patrols in some other parts of the world, although they could be just rumours. Rumour-spreading was officially forbidden, which didn't stop troopers from exchanging rumours and survival tips at every opportunity. Even the newcomers from the homeworld had finally learned to listen to those who had landed on Earth with the first invasion force. They'd survived the worst that the humans could throw at them.

Two aircraft flew overhead, matching course with the armoured vehicle for a few moments. It always made Gra'sha feel better to know that there were aircraft overhead, watching and waiting to provide support if they ran into trouble. They were supposed to run a random patrol, but there were only a handful of possible routes from the base they could run and the humans knew them all. Even if they didn't run into an ambush this time, they were likely to run into one the next time… and some human ambushes had been *nasty*.

He was still watching the environment when he saw a single naked Eridiani standing by the side of the road. For a moment,

Gra'sha refused to believe what he was seeing — and then he connected it with the missing intelligence officer the Command Triad had warned them to look out for. It was just typical of intelligence to insist that the troopers on the ground poured out all the stops for a missing intelligence officer — not that he would ever dare say that out loud, of course. Intelligence officers tended to spend more time watching their subordinates for disloyalty rather than monitoring their human enemies. Absently, he wondered if that were true of the human intelligence organisations too. Probably. Certain things were universal, even among the non-humanoid race that had been the State's first major foe.

The vehicle pulled to a halt near the missing officer and Gra'sha dismounted, quickly. It was quite possible that the humans were using their captive as the bait in a trap, although quite what they hoped to gain from it was beyond him. The intelligence officer seemed rather disorientated as Gra'sha reached him, but looked very relieved to see a friendly face. How had the humans treated him while he was their captive? They did all kinds of horrible things to their fellows, according to the briefings they'd received — what would they do to a captive trooper, let alone someone who could actually tell them what they needed to know.

"It's all right," he said, as the intelligence officer staggered towards the vehicle. It looked as though the humans had just dumped him, presumably some distance from their base. They'd take a look at the orbital coverage and see if they could trace the humans back to where they'd kept their captive. "You're safe now."

He helped the captive into the vehicle and remounted, hefting his weapon as he surveyed the horizon for human threats. Somehow, he was sure that none would materialise. The humans had wanted to give them the captive — they wouldn't blow them up now. He smiled as the vehicle hummed back into life and started heading straight back to the base. Whatever the humans had had in mind, there was a good chance of promotion or a bonus from their superiors. And that would give the small crew a chance with the females when mating season rolled around.

And if they managed to trace the humans back to their lair, they might just be able to decapitate the resistance in a single blow.

Chapter Thirty-Five

London
United Kingdom, Day 47

"Maz'Bak's debriefing has been completed," the intelligence officer informed Oheghizh. "The humans treated him fairly well by their standards. They did, however, interrogate him quite extensively."

"And as an intelligence officer he had a great deal to tell them," Oheghizh said. Curiosity was not encouraged by the State, but intelligence officers were an exception to that rule. Indeed, rather than stamping on excessively curious youths, the intelligence service preferred to recruit them. Their curiosity could be put to work on behalf of the State. "What did he tell them, precisely."

"It's all in the report," the intelligence officer said. "They know a great deal more about us than they knew before they raided the detention centre."

Oheghizh skimmed through the report, barely keeping himself from swearing out loud. The humans weren't supposed to know anything about any of the other races out among the stars — but now they did, along with far too much information on the galactic geopolitics that had led the State to Earth. And they knew how the command network on Earth was organised, the location and identities of the Command Triad… anywhere else, the information would have had a disastrous impact. If the humans had climbed into space, like any halfway sane race, it would have given them a decisive advantage. Instead, they were still trapped on the bottom of Earth's gravity well.

The Command Triad was not going to be pleased. Nor was the State, when superior authority heard about it. Earth had already soaked up more resources and combat power than anyone had anticipated, which meant that reinforcements had to be diverted from other planets. The human military personnel they'd taken off-planet and sent to disputed worlds might redress the balance, but how could they be trusted completely? They weren't even mercenaries; they'd been pressed into service. And they'd know it.

"On the other hand, we did manage to trace the humans back to their lair," the intelligence officer added. "They must have a fairly major command post of their own hidden in the general area. If we wait a couple of days, and then attack… we might be able to cripple the human resistance."

Oheghizh nodded, sourly. In truth, he wasn't sure that it would

do more than hamper the human resistance organisation. The American command and control structure had been shattered by the opening blows of the invasion, but they were somehow still managing to mount a creditable challenge to the State. Intelligence was fairly sure that there was no overall commanding authority, which raised worrying questions about how far the Americans took the concept of leaderless resistance. It was an idea alien to the State.

"Prepare an assault force," he ordered, finally. "And have the former captive shipped to orbit for a more extensive debriefing. I want to know everything he told his captors — and I'm sure that the Command Triad will too."

He watched the intelligence officer scuttle out of his office, and then he turned to look out over London. The riots that had threatened their grip on the city had died away after the BBC had reported that the alien captive was safe and well, back with his own people, but they'd come alarmingly close to overwhelming their ability to govern the city. Part of him was tempted to just pull out and leave the humans to slaughter each other, yet he knew they needed as much of the local economy functioning as possible. The registry was already being used to earmark humans for clean-up efforts — and if they refused to work, they would starve.

And if they did manage to cripple the human resistance, perhaps they could bring the whole campaign to a successful conclusion.

* * *

Robin lay on his bed, staring up at nothing. It wasn't his bed, not really. The flat had been abandoned in the opening days of the invasion and the police, needing living space for policemen who had been forced out of their homes, had commandeered it. Robin had no idea who had owned the flat before he'd moved in, but they had had excellent taste in wine. He'd downed no less than six bottles over the last two days and was seriously considering finishing off the rest. It could hardly have made his life any worse.

Back before the invasion, he'd been a loyal policeman, upholding the law even when he'd wanted to forgot proper procedure and just kick some young thug's head in, or turn water cannons on protestors who had no idea how lucky they were. And then the aliens had invaded and he'd told himself that he had to go to work for them, just to keep the public safe. His own justifications rang hollow in his ears, mocking him; how safe was the public in a world at war? Outside, parts of the city had been torn apart by rioting, dead bodies lay everywhere and what remained of the police force was working for

the aliens. And they weren't the only ones. Some of the special constables the aliens had recruited weren't policemen, or even soldiers. They just wanted to get their kicks by pushing around helpless civilians.

He reached for the bottle and cursed when his trembling hand knocked it down onto the floor. Somehow, he managed to roll over, just in time to see the red wine draining out of the bottle and soaking the carpet. It would probably drip down to the flat underneath, giving the inhabitant a scare. He pulled himself upright and rubbed at his head. Maybe a few more drinks would make him drunk and then he could forget the world for a while. If he could go home, if he could see his wife… but she didn't want anything to do with him now, not after the chaos in London. The entire world hated the policemen, those who had joined up to serve the aliens. If he'd known…

…Perhaps he would have gone underground too.

The thought was a bitter one. There were policemen, unmarried policemen, who had deserted their comrades and gone off to join the resistance. But they were the ones who had no hostages to fortune — or to the aliens. The married men knew that their wives and children were known to the aliens, and that they would be killed if their husbands or fathers showed any signs of disloyalty. Perhaps his wife could have evaded them if he'd vanished in the early hours of the invasion, when so many had gone missing, presumed dead, but it was now far too late. He reached for another bottle, struggled with the cork, and then took a long swig. Who cared about going on duty now? Maybe they'd just kill him and that would be an end to it.

How long had it been, he asked himself, since he'd walked his first beat? Not long at all, really; he'd known that he didn't want to go anywhere else. The endless red tape that strangled real policing, the politically-correct rules invented and enforced by politicians that made it impossible to nick real villains or monitor terrorists… despite all the trials and tribulations of modern policing, he'd loved his job. And now he was nothing more than a filthy quisling. They didn't need to drag up examples from France or Norway any longer, not when there were thousands of collaborators in the United Kingdom. They'd be calling them Robins in the future, no doubt.

His hands started to shake and he put the bottle down, quickly. He should get up and shower before donning his uniform, but he really didn't care any longer. The weapons they'd stashed away… maybe he should go to the stash, pull out one of the pistols, and put a bullet through his own brains. What else could he do? Resistance was futile. He was halfway to his feet before realising that suicide would probably mean doom for his wife, if the aliens decided to view his suicide as a kind of desertion. Did they even *have* suicide as a

concept? There was no way to know, although given their tough bodies, killing themselves probably required poison. Or maybe they just jumped out of their starships and burned up in the atmosphere below. The thought made him giggle, a sure sign that he was drunker than he realised.

"You know," a voice remarked, "there's little sillier than a drunken policeman."

Robin's eyes snapped open. He'd been alone. Unlike some of the other policemen, he had no intention of bringing a whore back to his flat. He still loved his wife, despite everything — and besides, at least some of the whores had murdered their policemen and vanished into the underground. No one loved the police these days. Through his rather hazy vision, he saw a young Asian man standing by the door, wearing a policeman's uniform. Robin didn't recognise him — and there was something about the way he wore his uniform that suggested that he wasn't a policeman at all. But someone wearing a policeman's uniform could walk around the complex without being questioned…

"Don't worry," the man said. "I'm not here to kill you."

"Right," Robin growled. His head felt as if someone had smashed it with a brick, repeatedly. Mixing the different kinds of alcohol had probably been a mistake. It was hard to form words in his mind, let alone say them out loud. "What do you want then?"

"My name is… well, they've been calling me Abdul," the man said. Despite his light, almost flippant tone, his brown eyes never left Robin's face. "You may have heard of me. I believe the reward on my head is currently enough luxury food to keep someone eating for the next few months."

The name seemed to shock Robin out of his drunken haze. Of course he'd heard of Abdul — he was supposed to be one of the ringleaders behind the resistance, linking together groups as disparate as National Front racists and Islamic Fundamentalists. The name had been mentioned by captured insurgents during their interrogation, but none of them had known where Abdul based himself. Some policemen had thought that the name was a joke, yet the aliens had taken it seriously. The reward on Abdul's head was massive.

"Don't worry, they don't know I'm here," Abdul assured him. One hand rubbed the uniform, mockingly. "It's amazing how many people spy the uniform and don't look past it to the face."

"We don't know what you look like," Robin managed. Up close, Abdul was almost unmemorable. He had no beard, but otherwise he could simply have faded into the crowd and vanished. Bearded Asian men had often been targeted by the aliens, purely on suspicion. One of Robin's fellow policemen had joked that the aliens found beards

intimidating because they couldn't grow them themselves. "And now… why are you here?"

"I was told that you might know where some weapons are stashed," Abdul said, lightly. "I think that it is time we talked, don't you?"

Robin staggered to his feet and stumbled over to the shower. The water in London was often turned off and then on again by the aliens, purely to remind Londoners who was in charge, but there was never any problem with the water in police complexes. He turned the knob and blasted cold water over his head, shocking himself awake. Part of him wanted to sound the alert and call for help, but the rest of him… if Abdul knew that Robin had been involved in hiding weapons, what else did he know? It wouldn't take much to alert the aliens to his betrayal — and they'd definitely see it as a betrayal. All weapons were supposed to have been surrendered to them.

"Fuck," he said, as his mind finally caught up with him. "Who told you?"

"Does it matter?" Abdul asked. "All that really matters is that we need to talk."

Drying up the water dripping from his hair gave Robin a moment to think. He hadn't been the only copper involved in hiding weapons, and two of the ones who had had deserted after the first riots. One or both of them could have found Abdul and shared confidences with him, naming Robin as someone who had hoped that he would be in the position to do something about the aliens one day. But that day had never come…

"Very well," he said. "What do we have to talk about?"

"You know that the aliens won't ever leave on their own," Abdul said. "Do you really believe that that collaborator asshole they have speaking for them can influence them in any way?"

"No," Robin said. He'd never trusted Alan Beresford, even when he'd been MP for Haltemprice rather than a collaborator claiming to be Prime Minister. The man smiled too much, among his many other failings. There had been rumours of shady dealings, but nothing had ever been proven. And now it was too late. "Do you believe that fighting them will make them give up and go away?"

"It's all we have left," Abdul commented. "You do know that the Vietnamese drove the Americans away after years of inconclusive warfare?"

"Years," Robin grated. It felt almost as if the aliens had *always* been on Earth. Had it really been less than two months? "Do you think that we can keep fighting them until they give up and leave us in peace? Or simply drop a massive rock on our heads and slaughter the remaining humans on Earth?"

"There's little other choice," Abdul said. He leaned forwards, warningly. "We need your help to hit them, policeman. Think about your people and join us."

Robin hesitated. "My wife…"

"We can get her out of their reach," Abdul assured him. "We'll fake her death and hide her in one of our bases. All it needs is for you to decide which side you're on. Do you support your fellow humans, or ugly aliens intent on turning us all into slaves?"

Robin looked down at his hands. How much blood was on them? How many had died, at least in part, because of him and his fellow collaborators? The aliens had slaughtered humans when protest marches had gotten out of hand, to say nothing of threatening mass slaughter to get one of their captives back. And they'd succeeded. The resistance had surrendered their captive, despite endless complaints on the internet that one city was a worthwhile trade for an alien who might finally provide real answers.

"My fellow humans," he said, finally. He reached for his uniform, feeling a flicker of the old pride he'd felt when he'd first donned it as a fully-fledged policeman. "What exactly do you want me to do?"

Abdul smiled and told him.

"Write a letter to your wife," he said, afterwards. "We'll make sure it gets delivered."

* * *

I should be part of the attack force, Alex thought sourly, as she parked the car outside the house. It was situated in one of London's surrounding towns, a nice place to live if you could afford the rent. *I want to hit back at the bastards, not play secret agent…*

Most of her wounds were healing, thankfully, but the medics had been insistent that she should avoid actual fighting for at least another month or two. Alex had pointed out that they could hardly send someone back home to recuperate when the aliens had occupied the entire country, yet they'd been insistent. She'd been tortured, raped and abused and she really needed time to recover. They seemed to expect her to break down at any moment, rather than being determined to get back out there and keep righting the Leathernecks. The doctor had strongly urged her to go to the Highlands of Scotland or one of the other long-term resistance bases and had been surprised when she'd refused.

She climbed out of the car, ignoring the handful of sharp glances from pedestrians as she locked the door behind her. Only collaborators had fuel for cars these days; the aliens hadn't touched

this part of Britain as much as they'd touched London, but their presence was keenly felt. They had a base only a few miles away, part of the ring of steel surrounding London proper. She touched the Browning she'd stuffed into her coat pocket — just in case, even though she had papers that should have fooled the aliens — and walked up to the house. There was the faint sound of music coming from inside.

Calmly, she pushed the button. There was no sign that the neighbours had realised that the house's lone occupant was married to a collaborator, but if they ever found out… some wives and children of collaborators had been bullied, or isolated, or even murdered by their former friends and neighbours. The door opened a crack and a lady with Italian features peered out.

"I have a letter for you," Alex said. "I suggest you read it now and then come with me."

Helene Harrison skimmed through the letter, her eyes going wide. "I am to come with you?"

"Yes," Alex said. There was no time to argue. "Don't worry — you've nothing to worry about. Just come with me for your own safety."

There was a pause as Helene picked up a bag she'd positioned at the doorway and then came outside. Alex felt an odd flicker of jealousy as she realised just how beautiful Helene was, before seeing the fear in her eyes. She hadn't seen her husband for over a month and yet her neighbours would condemn her, if they ever realised that he was a collaborator. But he could have died when the aliens hit Scotland Yard… Alex glanced at Helene and realised that she pitied the girl. The Helene Harrison's of the country were whom the RAF had existed to defend.

She climbed into the car, checked the Helene was buckled in, and started the engine. They had a long journey before they reached the safe house — and they'd have to abandon the car along the route. Who knew how closely the aliens monitored human vehicles?

Chapter Thirty-Six

Near London/London
United Kingdom, Day 50/51

They approached from the west, crawling low to be sure that they weren't seen as they neared the isolated station. A simple chain-link fence provided security, barely a moment's delay for SF soldiers who'd been taught lock-picking as part of their intensive training before they were unleashed on Britain's enemies. No one should have been anywhere near the station, but they checked twice before relaxing slightly and locating the keys they'd taken from the bunker. The door clicked open, revealing nothing, but darkness inside.

Chris Drake pulled a torch from his belt and clicked it on, aiming it into the darkness. They'd been briefed that the isolated station — part of a contingency plan that had been drawn up during the Cold War — had been left untouched for years, but it wouldn't be the first time some vagrant had set up home in an isolated building. The building looked untouched, however; a thick layer of dust bore silent tribute to the years since it had been built and then abandoned. He found the hatch on the ground, inserted a different key, and breathed a sigh of relief as the hatch opened without trouble. It led down a long rusty ladder to an isolated part of London's sewer network, one that had been sealed off from the main network years ago. Chris hooked the torch onto his belt and started to climb down the ladder, bracing himself for the smell. None of these tunnels had been cleaned for decades.

"Clear," he called back up, once he'd reached the bottom. The sewer network extended all the way from London out into the countryside. London was honeycombed with tunnels, some known to the public; others known only to the government, or simply forgotten in the years since they'd been built and abandoned. It was a way to get in and out of the city without being detected or stopped by the aliens. "Come on down. The smell is terrible."

The others chuckled as they clambered down and found themselves in an abandoned sewer, standing on a walkway that led into the darkness. "Better not fall into that," one of the Marines commented. "Worse than that shitty pond at Kandahar."

Chris snorted as he started leading the way down the walkway. "You want to bet that some mutant turtles have been breeding down here," he said, flashing the beam of light over the still water. "People used to put crocodiles down here with the rest of the shit they threw out."

"Thank you, sir," the Marine said. "I won't ever be able to wipe that image from my mind."

The walk seemed to stretch out into hours. It was strange to think that the aliens were just above them, watching for any signs of trouble. Chris knew that smaller parties of insurgents were meant to be launching a series of attacks to keep the aliens busy, but there was no way to know just how they were faring down in the tunnels. The torch flickered once as they reached a crossroads, reminding him of all the horror stories he'd read of monsters lurking deep underground. Aliens from *Alien*, sewer monsters from *The X-Files*… as a kid, he'd loved watching horror movies. And even as an adult, the memory still sent a chill running down his spine.

They reached the end of the tunnel and stopped dead. There was supposed to be a way around the blockage, into the parts of the sewers that were still working. Chris puzzled over the chart, before realising that they had walked past a smaller tunnel that connected to the main stream. The roof seemed to be closing in on them as they passed through a hidden door and out into the main body of the sewers. From what he recalled, most of the sewage was pumped out of the city, cleansed and then… actually, he couldn't remember what happened then. They weren't allowed to simply pump it into the Thames any longer, if he recalled correctly.

"Jesus," one of the men commented. "What a fucking pong."

Chris nodded, trying hard to breathe through his nose. In the distance, he could hear the sound of pumps pushing the sewerage through the tunnels. The environment was a breeding ground for rats, according to the briefing — he saw one running along a pipe before vanishing into the darkness. They seemed to have almost no fear of humanity, running up and almost touching their boots before jumping back to avoid kicks from the soldiers. Chris remembered that rats had carried diseases in pre-modern times and shuddered. The aliens had broken down a great many health and safety systems. There were probably places in Britain where scurvy and other long-forgotten diseases had returned to torment the human race.

He saw a light in the distance and reached for his pistol, before realising that it was the welcoming committee. Two of the soldiers who had been in London ever since the invasion were waiting for them, including someone he hadn't seen since the Battle of London, when he'd been swept out of the city by the river. He called his name and ran forward, heedless of the danger of slipping and falling into the shit. It had been far too long since they'd seen one another.

"Bongo," he said, as they hugged. "I thought you were dead!"

"I thought *you* were dead, you old pirate," Bongo said. He'd come from Jamaica to join the British Army and had been streamlined into

the Household Division. “What the fuck blew you out of London?”

“The aliens,” Chris said, as Bongo pointed to the ladder leading upwards to the safe house. He couldn’t imagine which civil servant had been so paranoid as to designate a handful of houses as emergency evacuation points, but he had to admit that the paranoia had made it a great deal easier to slip into London. “What have you been doing with yourself, then?”

Bongo filled him in once they reached the top and clambered out into the safe house. Chris had seen a couple like it while he’d been on close-protection details, places where MI5 could debrief defectors or notable public figures could hide from the media. It looked perfectly normal from the outside, but most of the building would be wired for sound and the tapes stored at a different location. He hoped they’d taken out the bugs once they’d started to use it as a base.

“Oh, we’re not based here,” Bongo said, when he asked. “There’s too much chance that someone will come across a reference to the place in the files — too many damn bureaucrats went over to the aliens. We just use it because it has access to the sewers.”

He made a show of glancing at his watch. “We’ll have to wait here until the sun goes down,” he added, “so we may as well have a brew. I hope you bought some teabags from outside…?”

“And a few army-issue packed lunches,” Chris said, with a grin.

“Bastard,” Bongo said, without heat. “Anyway… what have you been doing with yourself since Westminster?”

* * *

It was an hour before Bongo decided that the night had fallen far enough to allow them to slip out onto the streets. The aliens and their collaborators had put a stop to London’s once-celebrated nightlife by enforcing a curfew, but they didn’t really have the manpower to keep it firmly in place outside Central London. Bongo and the rest of the resistance could still move about with impunity as long as they didn’t go too close to the aliens, who had night-vision gear and a willingness to open fire without confirming that the contact was actually hostile. Most humans knew to give them a wide berth.

Chris had grown up in London and had loved the city, even though he’d left school with few qualifications and little hope of a worthwhile job outside the army. Looking at the city now tore at his heart. Buildings had been destroyed, or reduced to blackened shells of what they’d once been; the once-endless traffic had been driven off the road, leaving London’s population forced to walk from place to place on foot. Burned-out cars were everywhere, a reminder that the

aliens sometimes used them for target practice; others had bullet holes through their windscreens or superstructure. He saw a handful of dead bodies as they slipped onwards and wondered just how many had died in the weeks since the aliens had landed. London had had a huge population once, but now… now there was no way to know how many were left. He only saw a couple of living humans as they walked through the gloom.

Bongo had said that many of the gangs had wiped each other out. They'd been dependent upon selling drugs to customers, drugs that were no longer available because the aliens had sealed off London and destroyed world shipping. The gangs had been reduced to fighting over the last few bags of cocaine or heroin, while their customers had been forced to go cold turkey, weaning themselves off the drugs the hard way. Chris had nothing, but contempt for those who became enslaved to the needle or snorting powder, yet many of the addicts would have suffered greatly for lack of their crutch. One more crime to blame on the Leathernecks, he told himself, as they reached what had once been a large housing estate. The locals probably knew that the resistance had a base there, but hadn't breathed a word to the police. They'd probably felt that having the resistance there was good for them. The resistance certainly didn't waste time taking protection money or all the other tricks the gangs used to pull.

"Come on," Bongo hissed. Inside, the massive block of flats smelled faintly of urine. "I'm sorry about the stench, but we can't risk standing out from the crowd."

Chris nodded as the doors closed behind them. "Welcome to one of our staging bases," Bongo said. He nodded towards a team of four people who had been waiting for them. "Abdul — SAS dude, very brave or thoroughly crazy. Jake — local volunteer, smart-ass. Janet — our… ah, contact with some of the police. And Fatima — our doctor."

"Welcome to London," Abdul said, dryly. He might not have been wearing a proper uniform — none of them were — but he managed to *look* as if he was dressed for parade. "I think you'll hate what we've done to the place."

He shrugged and stood up. "There are places to sleep here, so get some rest," he added. "In the morning, we will start checking out our targets and planning the final stages of the operation. And then we're going to send a lot of people out through the tunnels before the shit hits the fan."

Chris nodded. "Let the CO know that we got here," he said. "How do you plan to check out the targets?"

Abdul smiled. "Let's just say that we had a little help and leave it at that," he said. "You don't need to know the precise details."

* * *

The following morning, after a breakfast that mainly consisted of the ration packs they'd carried through the tunnels, Abdul led Chris and a couple of others out into the city. They'd all been issued ID cards that noted their occupation as workers, people who moved from place to place to do manual labour for the alien overlords. London had simply too much damage to clear up and almost everyone who wasn't in a priority occupation had been tasked to help with the work — or starve. It was an attitude that Chris found rather understandable — it would certainly have helped clear up many of Britain's inner cities and housing estates — but the aliens didn't care about the niceties. From what many of the resistance fighters who'd stayed in London had reported, the aliens pushed the workers as hard as they could.

Dozens of work gangs roamed the city, clearing up smashed or burned-out cars, carting away debris from fallen buildings and even picking up dead bodies from where they'd been abandoned. Chris wouldn't have been surprised to discover that Londoners had an epidemic on their hands as well as everything else, just from the number of dead bodies that had been left to rot for a few days. The teams that cleaned up the dead wore NBC suits and were apparently granted special privileges by the aliens. Chris doubted that anyone could be given enough privileges to make the work worthwhile.

And there were policemen everywhere in Central London. Chris watched them checking ID cards as they patrolled, remembering the stories he'd heard about the French Resistance and those who had collaborated with the Germans. The police might have started to collaborate out of a desire to keep the public safe, but now they were nothing more than a millstone around London's neck. Some of the men wearing police uniforms reminded Chris of the torturers he'd pulled out of the Detention Camp and executed, men who wanted to indulge their dark tastes and were willing to serve the aliens in exchange for having their way with their victims. Others looked ashamed and tried to do as little as possible.

The aliens themselves were very much in evidence. Chris watched as they ran armed patrols through London, waiting for one of the resistance fighters to take a shot at them. When they were engaged, they threw back a hail of bullets, with an alarming lack of concern for civilians who might be caught up in the crossfire. They didn't seem to recognise that some people just wanted to get on with their lives and ignore politics; anyone they caught close to the resistance fighter was often dragged away and dumped in the back of an alien vehicle.

"They go outside the city to one of the camps," Abdul muttered, as they busied themselves carting away rubble. "The Leathernecks

sometimes press them into service, but mostly they just seem to leave them in the camps. We don't know why…"

"We don't know a great deal about them," Chris muttered back. They'd been studying the alien base they'd built on the remains of Buckingham Palace, a base that was heavily guarded, without any humans allowed to pass through the fence. The intelligence briefing had stated that the alien commander charged with invading and occupying Britain was based there, which explained the precautions. They had to feel more isolated than the Americans in the Green Zone in Baghdad had felt during the war in Iraq. "It's not going to be easy to get in there, not if they don't let humans into the building."

"There are some humans allowed in," Abdul said. "Their collaborator-in-chief, for one. I don't think he'd help us unless we pointed a gun at his head and I think the aliens would probably notice if we did."

Chris chuckled. The aliens did seem to be curiously uninterested in some human activities, although there seemed to be no rhyme or reason to their disinterest. They didn't seem to be interested in what humans were wearing, or in sex, even though both of them were clues to another human that something might not be right. He picked up another piece of rubble and dropped it in the cart, shaking his head. The aliens had their weaknesses, just like humans. All they had to figure out how to do was use their weaknesses against them.

His lips twitched with sly amusement. If it was that easy, he knew, everyone would be doing it.

They'd definitely realised that having their troops keep a fixed routine was a dangerous mistake. The patrols through London seemed to be random, while the guards patrolling the fence surrounding their base were varying their routine. Chris suspected, from the way they were moving, that there were probably reinforcements inside the base, just as there had been at the Detention Camp. But apart from that…? The closest major alien base was outside the city. If they could pin down the forces defending the base itself, they could run riot before the aliens could respond…

* * *

"I think you're going to be going out of the city tonight," Bongo said. Fatima nodded, tiredly. Her skills had helped save lives, but she'd watched too many people die because she didn't have the supplies or equipment to save them. "Once you get through the tunnels, you'll probably be taken up north with some of the others."

Fatima sighed. She'd never really been out of London, apart from

a brief trip to Edinburgh. Her stepmother had wanted her to go to Pakistan, but Fatima had refused — she'd suspected that her stepmother had intended to marry her off. And now… where was her stepmother? The aliens had taken her away and… what? Had they killed her, or imprisoned her, or… she wasn't anyone important, not really. Hardly the kind of person they'd want to interrogate thoroughly.

But she'd been related to the first suicide bomber. That alone made her a person of interest.

"I see," she said, finally. "When do you want me to be ready?"

"Get your stuff ready when you have a moment," Bongo said. "We'll have to wait until dark anyway. They might spot us moving through the streets in daytime."

Fatima grinned, realising that she was being teased. As far as she knew, the aliens still wanted her for the crime of being related to a young man foolish enough to blow himself up — along with hundreds of humans and a dozen aliens. The collaborator government kept making that point on the BBC, reminding everyone of the evils of suicide bombing. Fatima couldn't really disagree, even though she'd disliked the young asshole. He'd thought that all women should be neither seen nor heard.

"Right," she said. "Will you be coming with me?"

"Probably not," Bongo said. "I have work to do here."

Fatima nodded. "Good luck," she said. "May God go with you."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

North England
United Kingdom, Day 51

"I think we have a problem."

Gavin looked over at the operator. He was manning one of the computer stations monitoring alien activity in the region, using their own computer networks against them. It gave them a view of what the aliens were doing, although he had to keep reminding himself not to take it for granted. The aliens, if they ever worked out what the humans were doing, could get around it by simply disconnecting from the network.

"The aliens have dispatched a flight of aircraft coming right towards our position," the operator said. "Their ETA is roughly ten minutes - perhaps less. I think we've been rumbled."

The damned captive, Gavin thought, angrily. The decision to release the alien might have made sense, but there had been no time to conceal their tracks properly. All the aliens had had to do was look at their orbital observations and they might well be able to track the small team back to the holding cell. And the PM and several other officials were based nearby as well.

"Send the alert to the PM's bodyguards and tell them to get his ass out of there," he ordered, flatly. Seven minutes… not very long at all. There wouldn't be any hope of completely dissembling the base and vanishing before the aliens arrived. "And then start the destruct sequence on our computers. I want nothing left that could lead the aliens to any other bases."

"Aye, sir," the operator said. There was a bleep from his console. "Sir, they've also started detailing land forces in our general direction. Should I send an update to the picketers?"

"Yes," Gavin said. He'd scattered small teams in positions along the roads leading to the base, teams armed with antitank weapons. They could slow the aliens down, but there was no easy way to slow down the aircraft. Their stock of antiaircraft missiles had largely been earmarked for Operation Hammer. "Tell them to land one good punch and then bug out. I don't want a stand-up battle if we can avoid it."

He glanced down at the map. The aliens had used helicopter assaults before, often with just as much bravery and skill as their human counterparts. They presumably wanted to take the alien's interrogation team prisoner, if possible — did they know that they were close to the PM, as well as Gavin himself? There was no way to know. No one outside the base knew what it hid, a security precaution

that had seemed rather paranoid at the time.

"And then start making your way to the exit," he added. "You know where to go if we get split up?"

"Yes, sir," the operator said. He watched as Gavin checked the SA80 he carried slung over his shoulder. There'd used to be regulations against arming soldiers who weren't on duty. Those regulations no longer existed, along with the MOD that had sometimes seemed more paranoid about its soldiers being armed than about security. "Good luck."

* * *

Gabriel had been sleeping lightly when the door burst open. He jumped awake, one hand reaching for the pistol on the table. He'd never fired a weapon before the invasion began, but Butcher and his team had insisted that he learn and spent several days in the forest showing him how to load, fire and clean a Browning automatic. It felt oddly reassuring in his hand, even though he knew that he would never be a crack shot. The SAS men regularly shot birds out of the sky and made it look easy.

"Prime Minister," Butcher said. "We just had a warning from the OP. The aliens are on their way, coming here. You need to get up, now."

He pulled Gabriel out of bed and tossed him his dressing gown. "There isn't any time to dress," he said, as he scooped up the overnight bag they'd insisted that Gabriel pack when they'd first arrived. "They'll be on our heads in five minutes."

The thought made Gabriel shake off his drowsiness and follow Butcher down the stairs. A handful of staff were at the bottom, talking urgently among themselves in grim voices. Butcher ignored them and pulled Gabriel towards the rear of the building when he started to slow down, nodding to Hughie and Mother as they appeared in front of them. The two men were armed to the teeth, carrying what looked like enough rifles and grenades to fight a small war. Judging from the military's statistics Gabriel had read back before the invasion, they barely had enough for a brief skirmish with the enemy.

Outside, the morning dew hung heavily in the air. He could hear the sound of birds awakening from their slumber, but nothing else, not even a hint that someone was heading towards them with bad intentions. Gabriel almost opened his mouth to ask if it was a drill, before hearing the first sounds of helicopters in the distance. These days, there were only a handful of human aircraft in the air, all operated by collaborators. The aliens were definitely on their way.

Haddon Hall's rear gardens blurred into the forest surrounding the estate. In his first week at the hall, Gabriel had enjoyed walking through the woodlands and watching the animals scuttling around, untouched by the war marring Britain's soil. Now, there was no time to sightsee. He relaxed slightly as the trees and branches closed in around them, providing a limited amount of cover. The aliens might lose them within the gloom. He found himself praying as they stopped, briefly, near a cache of supplies Butcher had hidden in the forest, including a small change of clothes. They could pass for poachers trying to supplement their rations if the aliens caught up with them, although they had no ID cards. If the aliens demanded that they produce the cards… what could they do, but fight?

The sound of helicopters grew louder. Gabriel glanced up and saw dark shapes moving over the forest, heading towards the hall. He cringed back, only to be pulled back into a run by Butcher. The aliens might come down right on top of them if they lingered. Behind him, he could hear the sound of gunfire. Someone in the hall was giving the aliens a hot reception.

"We'll head to the coast and grab a boat," Butcher said, as they headed further away from the hall. The SAS man didn't even have the decency to pretend he was winded. Gabriel knew that he was the one who would slow them down, if they encountered the enemy. He'd once asked Butcher if they would put a bullet in his head if capture was certain. Butcher had ducked the question. "And then we can head north to somewhere a little safer."

Gabriel nodded, breathing hard. He'd had more exercise at the hall than he'd had in his entire life — with three SAS men as instructors — but he still felt winded. But there was no choice. They had to keep moving or the aliens might catch up with them. And then… Gabriel had no illusions about what they'd do to him. They'd force him to betray his country on television and then take him outside and put a bullet through his brains. They didn't need the old Prime Minister when they had a collaborator willing and able to do everything they asked.

Behind them, the sound of gunfire grew louder.

* * *

The aliens appeared with terrifying speed, their attack helicopters swooping low over the forest, followed by a pair of heavy-lift helicopters loosely comparable to Chinooks. Gavin watched them come closer, knowing that the bigger helicopters were the dangerous ones. The aliens, if they wanted prisoners, couldn't simply hose down

the hall with bullets and rockets; they'd have to put boots on the ground. And the only way to do that quickly was through landing them from the air. They had their own version of the HALO parachute tactic, according to the internet. They'd used it while assaulting a French position in the south of France.

He keyed his radio. The aliens would be monitoring their traffic, but they shouldn't be able to get real-time decryptions — at least if the intelligence on their computer software was accurate. British forces in Afghanistan had been able to monitor their enemies transmissions and use it against their foes, sometimes as targeting information. It was a risk, but one Gavin felt was worth taking. The same considerations about wanting prisoners ensured that the aliens couldn't simply drop a rock on the transmitter from orbit.

"Fire," he ordered.

The forest seemed to erupt as the concealed GPMGs opened fire on the larger helicopters, while a single Stinger — the only one at the hall — roared upwards towards one of the attack helicopters. It struck the helicopter on its armour-plated underside, sending the helicopter staggering off in search of a good place to put down, smoke billowing out from its lower regions. The aliens had clearly been armouring up their helicopters, Gavin noted, as the other attack helicopters turned and started to fire back towards the soldiers in the forest. They stopped firing and started to run, but some weren't quick enough to escape. Gavin saw them die, just before one of the larger helicopters heeled over and fell towards the ground. It came down with a terrifying crash, but didn't explode. A moment later, he saw alien troopers emerging from the wreck, shooting to force the humans to keep their heads down. It would have been admirable if it hadn't been aimed at his troops.

He cursed as the attack helicopters made a second run over the hall, firing down with heavy machine guns towards the British positions. His men had had plenty of time to prepare defences, but building something to stand off a helicopter without being noticed by alien orbital satellites would have been difficult. The aliens knocked two of the positions out — he forced himself not to think about the men inside — before their second transport helicopter started dropping aliens down towards the ground. From his point of view, it looked as if they were dropping out on bungee cords. The moment they touched the ground, the cords broke, releasing them before they could be yanked back up into the air. Gavin's soldiers, positioned at the windows around the hall, opened fire on them; the alien attack helicopters, sighting the firing positions, hurled a deadly storm of lead towards the windows. Their heavy fire smashed chips off the stone walls and blasted through the windows. Below, two alien assault

teams ran forwards carrying what looked like an antitank weapon. They launched it into the main doors and shattered them backwards, smashing through the interior walls like paper.

Gavin clicked his radio twice — the signal to the outside teams to break contact and retreat to the RV points — and then abandoned the radio on the ground, kicking it under a bush. It would be too dangerous to use it now that the aliens controlled most of the ground. He could see a fireball rising up in the distance from where one of the larger IEDs had detonated, but he had no illusions about their ability to prevent the aliens from taking the hall. His close-protection detail spread out around him as he started to walk away from the hall. The remaining soldiers inside the building should be running for the exits, where they would link up with their fellows and start walking east. Gavin was the only one who knew that the PM and his team had headed west; the eastbound soldiers should provide some cover for his escape.

Another flight of alien helicopters swooped overhead, lowering a pair of light armoured vehicles to the ground. Gavin had seen the reports on their use against civilian rioters, but there hadn't been any report of them being used against resistance fighters before. They weren't as heavily armoured as Viking or Jackal vehicles, which should make them easy prey for antitank missiles or IEDs. On the other hand, they carried heavy machine guns and what intelligence claimed was a portable mortar launcher. It gave the aliens a surprisingly heavy punch for such light vehicles.

The ground shook as the first explosive charge inside the hall detonated. It had taken some specialist work by the defenders to position a fuel-air explosive in the basement, intended to send the entire hall up in flames. The aliens, picking their way into the building, were caught by a sheet of flame that seemed to roar up and out of nowhere. Gavin had been told that the main structure of the hall *might* survive — they'd known how to build tough buildings in those days — but anything the aliens might have been able to use to track the resistance to their next base would be destroyed. They'd never know for sure how close they'd come to decapitating the resistance, or bagging the PM. The Prime Minister's ability to broadcast to the country, using the internet, had helped keep the resistance going. Gavin said a silent prayer for his safety as they continued to head into the countryside. The aliens would be putting up roadblocks and cordoning off the area, intending to trap them before they could escape. They had to move quickly before time ran out.

Behind him, he heard another series of explosions, followed by rapid gunfire. It was impossible to guess at what was happening,

although most of the gunfire seemed to be coming from alien weapons. They kept running through the forest, despite hearing alien helicopters overhead, searching for fugitives. If they'd managed to improve their tracking technology, part of Gavin's mind insisted on reminding him, their helicopters or drones could keep track of them and steer a blocking force right into their path. Or maybe they'd just hose down the forest with bullets and leave their targets to bleed out and die.

The forest came to an end suddenly, broken by a road leading northwards towards the motorway. They crossed it rapidly, just as they heard the faint humming of alien vehicles racing towards them. Gavin heard the sound of gunfire and threw himself to the ground, trying to bury himself in the mud. Bullets were snapping right over his head, smashing through trees and branches with equal abandon. He heard one of his men yelp as a bullet slashed across his back — a inch or two lower and it would have shattered his spine — before the sound of alien helicopters came closer. The aliens, if they were still tracking the small party, would be sending in ground troops…

"Come on," one of his escort detail hissed. "We need to get out of this trap…"

The aliens were firing to force them to keep their heads down, but they could still crawl. Gavin squelched through the mud, just as he heard what sounded like incoming fire. An explosion, far too close to him, sent mud and branches flying towards his position. The second explosion picked him up and threw him through the trees. He crashed down and felt his arm snap under his weight. The pain almost overwhelmed him, even as he tried to stagger to his feet and run. Everything seemed to be shifting around him. It was almost impossible to move.

A dark shape appeared in front of him, pointing a gun towards his head. The alien's dark eyes seemed to meet his, and then pull back a little. Gavin remembered that they wanted prisoners and tried to reach for his pistol, but his hand refused to obey orders. He had to be more seriously injured than he'd thought…

The alien lifted a clawed hand and snapped it down across Gavin's face. There was a brief moment of shattering pain, and then he plunged down into darkness.

* * *

Gabriel was completely exhausted by the time they reached the coast, heading down towards a small village along the shore. It had probably once been a fishing village, but with the decline of the

fishing industry it had turned into a tourist attraction, with boat trips to the Isle of Man, Ireland and the Scottish Islands. Gabriel found a place to sit and catch his breath while Butcher walked down to the small harbour, looking for a boat that could take them north. He'd admitted that he'd steal a boat if necessary, but he'd prefer to avoid it if possible. The last thing they needed was an outraged village calling the aliens and reporting their escape.

He closed his eyes. The next thing he knew was Mother shaking him gently. "We have a boat and an ex-Royal Marine to sail it," he said. "Come on. We'd better get moving before the aliens catch up with us."

The sound of helicopters in the distance underscored his words. Gabriel followed him down to the harbour and blinked in surprise when he saw the boat. It was an elderly sailing boat rather than a more modern design, but it did have an outboard motor at the stern. The owner, a man who looked old enough to be a granddad, nodded when he saw Gabriel and then started the motor.

"You'll be heading north, right?" He said, as they motored out and into open water. Gabriel wondered if the shape he could see in the distance was Ireland, or if they were too far north to see the Emerald Isle. "I hope you've got somewhere safe to stay."

"Yes," Butcher said, shortly.

"I'll get you there, safe and sound," the sailor said. "Don't worry about a thing."

Gabriel half-turned, looking back at the receding shoreline. The green hills of England seemed to be illuminated as the sun beat down from high overhead, creating a marvellous picture. Despite himself, he wondered if he'd ever see them again. If they had to flee to Scotland, where would they go when the aliens came after them again?

"I'm not worried," Butcher said, stiffly. "I just want to be away from here before our friends catch up with us."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

London
United Kingdom, Day 55

"We're still on, then?"

"It looks that way," Abdul said, from where he was studying the laptop. London's internet connections were starting to collapse, although no one was quite sure if the aliens were doing it deliberately or if the wear and tear on the system was finally taking a toll. Probably both, Chris considered. The aliens had to know that the internet was being used to coordinate the resistance and they were recruiting computer experts. "We're too far advanced with the planning to back out now. If some groups don't get the message in time…"

Chris nodded. The alien attack on Haddon Hall — which had apparently been serving as a crucial resistance node — had scattered some of the resistance's fighting men, but it hadn't shattered the command network. Some people had suggested abandoning — or at least postponing — Operation Hammer, but too many people were already briefed and making preparations. Delaying the operation only increased the danger of the alien intelligence service figuring out what was coming before the operation was launched.

"Then" — he made a show of checking his watch — "we move from here in three hours and hit the aliens right where they live," he said. Offhand, he couldn't recall a bigger operation in recent history — let alone one mounted on such a shoestring. The cost of failure would be alarmingly high. "I take it that everyone is ready?"

There were nods from the small team. London was large enough to hide a couple of hundred fighting men — as well as the volunteers, gangsters and trouble-causers who were giving the collaborator government fits — in places close to their intended target. Thanks to Abdul's careful preparation — he'd recruited louts to smash CCTV cameras all over the city — the aliens and their collaborators would have difficulty realising that the assault force was being prepared, although they had to know that they were going blind. Chris privately suspected that one of the reasons the aliens had started insisting that people worked for their food was to keep control over the population, rather than leave people to their own devices. They might start getting ideas about lashing out at the aliens.

"Good," Chris said. He grinned to relieve the tension. "I feel like saying something terribly dramatic."

Abdul chuckled. "Once more into the breach, dear friends, once

more," he said. "Consign their parts most private to a Rutland fence."

Chris laughed. He'd missed laughing and joking with his comrades before an operation, or telling great lies about female conquests… anything, but taking about the coming battle. They'd prepared carefully and rehearsed as much as they could, yet the tension would continue to rise until they were actually moving out and heading towards contact. The only thing that would make it settle was actual engagement.

London wasn't what he remembered any longer. Even Basra or Kabul at their worst didn't match what the aliens had done to London. Chris would cheerfully have killed every last one of the aliens for what they'd done, both for the damage they'd inflicted upon London's monuments and for the fear that pervaded the lives of ordinary citizens. There was no longer any faith in the law, or the police; the police served the aliens and the law was a joke, unable even to protect those who had spent their entire lives following it. Many people had been arrested by the aliens after being denounced by their neighbours out of spite, or because the neighbours wanted to pay back old grudges… no one trusted anyone any longer. Chris imagined that Moscow under Stalin or Berlin under Hitler would have had the same aura of fear, of mistrust and suspicion, that seemed to have settled over London like a shroud.

No amount of joking could convince him that things were normal, or that they would ever be normal again. One of the guys he'd met during the briefings had commented that the discovery of alien life alone had changed the world, and it would have done so even if the aliens had been friendly, or indifferent to poor struggling humanity. And if the latest intelligence on the internet was to be believed, there were at least six other alien star-faring races out there. Humanity was a very small fish in a very large pond.

He looked down at his SA80 and shook his head. He'd already checked, cleaned and rechecked it twice in the last two hours. They should be resting and preparing themselves, but he'd never been able to rest before an operation. Some of the others didn't share that particular problem. They were sitting against the wall, snoring loudly. Their comrades would make sarcastic remarks later.

"Don't worry," Bongo said. "It'll be alright on the night."

One of the other soldiers managed to twist his voice into a shrill falsetto. "It's all right, dear," he said. "We'll try again in a few minutes. Just take a look at some of these naughty pictures…"

Chris glanced at his watch, again. Would zero hour never come?

* * *

Robin had had some difficulties in altering his duty schedule to fit the operation's requirements, but by calling in several favours he'd been able to have himself and four others assigned to the force guarding the collaborator government's headquarters. It helped that Beresford was something of a micromanager, intent on keeping as much as possible of his government's operations under his thumb. The old Civil Contingencies Centre had been destroyed during the alien invasion of London, but a new command centre had been set up under Beresford's headquarters and outfitted with the latest in communications and surveillance equipment. Many of the officers who worked there had become more tainted by collaboration than anyone else.

There was no difficulty in getting through the security checkpoints outside the building, not with police uniforms and ID cards. Robin was almost disappointed. Part of him thought that he was being treacherous to men he'd known and worked beside for years, even though they were serving the aliens — and he'd been serving the aliens until recently. But there was a fine line between doing what they could to keep the public safe and actively helping the aliens achieve their goals and many of the operators had crossed that line. And if there was an element of hypocrisy, even self-hatred, in that thought, Robin no longer cared. It was time to put an end to it.

They walked down the stairs and into the canteen, where they would wait until ten minutes to zero hour. The police had been getting more and better food lately, a bribe to keep them on the streets in the face of public hatred and near-constant attacks from gangs of resistance fighters. He poured himself a cup of tea and waited, glancing from time to time at his watch. They weren't meant to go on duty for another hour, but the collaborator government didn't approve of lateness. Even a few minutes late was grounds for a reprimand.

He tried to push his thoughts out of his mind as the seconds ticked down. In truth, he didn't expect to survive the next few hours. The aliens had their own guard force on duty by the gates and if they weren't taken out in the opening moments of Operation Hammer, they would certainly respond to rogue policemen. Operation Hammer, even the small section he'd been told about, had simply too many working components for everything to come off perfectly. Years of experience in the police force had taught him that the more moving parts in a particular operation, the greater the chance of something coming apart at the wrong moment. The day they'd had to arrest nearly fifty suspected terrorists across Britain had come alarmingly close to being unglued.

His watch vibrated a warning and he nodded to his allies,

standing up and heading down to the lockers. He'd stuffed the briefcase in the locker he used as a matter of course, just to keep someone from trying to open it too early. Between them, they were carrying assault rifles, grenades — and one large briefcase that had been converted into a makeshift IED. Picking up the final briefcase, Robin headed to the lift and down towards the bunker. It had started life as a corporate gym, but the collaborator government had lost no time in installing the latest computers and assigning operators to watch over the city. Robin had done a few shifts at Scotland Yard before the aliens had destroyed it and he had to admit that the collaborators had been very efficient. If they hadn't lost so many CCTV cameras over the past few weeks, they might realise what was going on before the operation began.

He strode through the chamber and up to a set of lockers assigned to senior personnel. One of them belonged to a detective-inspector with a habit of using the same combination for everything, a combination that he shared with some of his assistants who needed to use the locker. Robin opened the locker, cautioning himself to act normally and not make any moves that might attract attention, and placed the briefcase inside the locker. He had a cover story planned, but it wasn't necessary. People had a habit of assuming that anyone inside a secure perimeter had been cleared to be there. Closing the locker, he walked back out of the compartment and up the stairs to where his allies were waiting. The timer was ticking down the final minutes to zero hour. He took his rifle, pistol and a handful of grenades and led the way to the stairs. They were at the third floor when the building shook, violently. The IED inside the briefcase had detonated and taken out the command centre.

"Come on," he snapped, as they broke into a run. The emergency procedures insisted that everyone had to abandon the lifts and take the stairs, which meant that they would find it harder to get up while everyone else was heading down. He winced as the security alarm started to sound, even though it would add to the confusion. The procedure for security alerts was to remain where you were and wait. Panic would start sweeping the building.

The hardcore of dedicated collaborators were on the twentieth floor; men and women who had completely dedicated themselves to the alien cause. Some of them were intent on their own people, others had tastes they wanted to indulge — tastes that made Robin and his allies sick at the mere thought of such people being allowed out of jail and left free to prey on an innocent population. He kicked open the door and led the way into the first conference room. The collaborators looked up at him in shock, saw the weapons, and started to babble helplessly. Robin pointed his rifle at the closest man, shot him through

the head, and then moved onto the next. They would decapitate the entire collaborator government before they were done.

A woman — blonde, with long legs revealed by a very short skirt — ran for the other door. Robin hesitated, but one of the others didn't, putting a bullet in her back. She collapsed, blood leaking onto the carpet, as Robin turned his attention to the remaining collaborators. They were trying to run, or begging for mercy, but it was far too late. They were gunned down and abandoned, left to die like so many of their victims. Robin remembered the guilt and shame he'd felt when he'd served the aliens and refused to feel sorry for them. They'd chosen to serve the aliens and deserved to pay the price.

He kicked open the next door and ran into the office. A personal assistant — one he knew had been hired for her looks rather than her brains — took one look at him and started to scream. Robin ignored her and checked the next room, almost running straight into the Director of Human Resources. He'd always hated Human Resources departments — personnel departments had been much more friendly — but this one had served the aliens, turning humans into their servants. Cleaning the debris one day, burying the dead the next… they'd been shamelessly intent on selling out the entire human race. Robin hit him in the chest, knocked him down and then put a bullet through his head. Behind him, the assistant continued to scream.

All the alarms were going off now, deafening him. The people downstairs would be probably running now, despite security procedures. He headed back to the stairwell and ran up to the top floor, leaving the others behind to finish off the rest of the collaborators. It had once belonged to a rich businessman, but the collaborator-in-chief had taken it over to serve as his living space. God alone knew what had happened to the original owner. Far too many people had gone missing in the chaos since the aliens had landed. He kicked open the door and stormed into the penthouse. It was time for the bastard to pay for his crimes.

* * *

"What's that noise?"

Alan snorted, rolling over in bed. "I'm not paying you to talk," he sneered, through his yawns. He'd planned a late morning after a night spent enjoying himself with one of the whores his assistants had found for his pleasure. Prostitution was a buyer's market these days, particularly when one had access to real food and drink. The girl was young, barely legal age. Indulging himself with her was a sign that he

had truly arrived.

A moment later, the alarms shocked him awake. The emergency panel beside his bed was buzzing, reporting… an explosion? Every alarm seemed to be going off at once, demanding his attention. And had the entire building shook just now? If something had exploded down below, would it bring the entire building down…?

The girl looked over at him. "What's happening?"

She sounded frightened. Alan couldn't really blame her. "This building appears to be under attack," he said, as evenly as he could. Crisis… it was a crisis, but he knew how to deal with a crisis. The secret was to remain calm and alive. Everything else came second. "Get down on the floor and stay there…"

He heard the sound of someone breaking down the door in the next room and swore. If someone was intruding on his privacy, it almost certainly wasn't someone friendly. He'd made the point to his allies time and time again — he wanted his privacy while he slept. Desperately, he tore open the drawer and removed the pistol he'd hidden there, despite the alien edict against human firearms. The door burst open and he swung around, lifting the gun and pulling the trigger. It kicked in his hand, just as the intruder fired at him. There was a brief moment of pain, and then he fell into darkness.

* * *

Robin hadn't expected Beresford to have a gun. The collaborator's bullet passed through his chest, just above his heart. It felt as if someone had stabbed him with a red hot poker. The pain was so great that he almost fainted, before dropping to his knees and pressing one hand to the wound. Blood was spilling down, warm against his hand — and he knew that he was dead. It hurt to move, but there was no choice. He had to know that Beresford was dead.

Somehow, drawing on his every last ounce of determination, he managed to stagger towards where the collaborator had fallen. Beresford's dead face, twisted with agony, looked back at him. He was barely aware that there was someone else in the room until he saw the naked girl jump up from where she'd been lying and run towards the door. Robin wanted to call out to her, to warn her that she was running right into danger, but his mouth refused to cooperate. The pain was growing stronger and stronger, threatening to drag him down into the same blackness that had swallowed Beresford.

Should have had someone come with you, he thought he heard, at the back of his mind. It seemed to take hours before he managed to sit upright, keeping one hand pressed to his wound. It felt as if the bullet

had lodged itself in his body rather than coming out of his back. He could hear the sound of alien weapons in the distance, demanding his attention, yet he was so tired. His other hand reached for his pistol and tried to pull it from his belt, but it refused to come free from where he'd stashed it. It was all he could do to pull one of the grenades free as he heard the sound of heavy footsteps clumping up the stairs.

His vision was starting to blur, but somehow he managed to keep his eyes open until the first alien form lumbered into the room. They'd killed his fellows, then, or forced them to retreat… it hardly mattered. All that mattered was that he was dying — and that he wouldn't die alone. He pulled the pin from the grenade and looked up at the aliens as they advanced on him. They hadn't realised the danger. Perhaps they hadn't even realised that he had turned on them. They'd probably thought of him as a very loyal servant.

He thought, briefly, of his wife. They'd said that she was safe, somewhere to the north. He hoped that she would understand one day, and find happiness with someone else. There was no reason anyone had to know that her husband had been a collaborator, if only for a short period. And besides, he'd turned on the aliens. That had to count for something, didn't it? But that would depend on who wrote the history books. Humans — or Leathernecks? The winners always wrote the history books to please themselves.

"Fuck you," he managed to say, and jerked the grenade free. "Fuck you, you…"

The aliens jumped back, but it was far too late.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

London
United Kingdom, Day 55

"If this fails…"

"It won't," Abdul said. "Have a little faith in your fellow man."

Chris nodded, watching from his vantage point as the alien patrols headed towards their checkpoint. They were very careful with their routines these days, even though he was sure that there was a pattern in their movements. He couldn't blame them for that, or their decision to exclude human vehicles from their bases. The resistance had attempted to capture and drive a handful of alien vehicles, but the experiments hadn't been successful. They'd found the alien vehicles difficult to operate with human drivers.

The alien base loomed over London, a brooding metal shape that mocked humanity's pretensions to historical monuments. They'd built it on the remains of Buckingham Palace, just to illustrate the fact that the Earth belonged to them by right of conquest. Chris had heard that they'd done the same with the White House and the Kremlin, knocking them down to make room for their buildings. Perhaps it made sense from their point of view, rather than waving a red flag in front of the human bull. They'd certainly shown no particular willingness to give a damn about what humans thought. There was a certain blunt honesty in their actions that contrasted oddly with human political thinking. All the politicians who'd talked about not giving offense to people who harboured terrorists intent on killing British troops…

Abdul tapped his shoulder. "The policeman should be moving by now," he said. "Two minutes left. You ready?"

"Yes," Chris said. He glanced back at his team. They looked ready, even though they knew that challenging the aliens on their own base was incredibly dangerous. The aliens might just cut their losses and start dropping rocks from orbit. "Get the Javelin teams into position."

The laptop buzzed once. They'd spliced it into one of the underground telecommunications links that had made up the backbone of the British communications network before the aliens had arrived, using it to link into the internet. The final countdown had begun. All over the world, countless computers were being linked into the alien communications system, attempting to hack into it and bring it down. Chris wasn't sure if he believed any of the more extreme promises, but they should certainly disrupt the alien response. It was

all they'd need to get in, hit the bastards and get out again. The final seconds ticked down to zero.

He clicked his radio. "Go," he ordered. The snipers positioned on nearby rooftops opened fire, picking off the aliens within view. Their patrollers fell to the ground or dived for cover, trying to bring their own weapons up to return fire. They'd have some problems spotting the snipers, Chris hoped. "Javelin teams — go!"

The Javelin teams ran forward, taking up position to launch their antitank missiles directly at the alien gates. Chris had seen them used before to take out bunkers and other fortified positions, but as far as he could recall no one had ever used them to take out a gate. The missiles were fired before the aliens had a chance to react, blasting down towards the alien positions and slamming into their heavy gates. Chris watched as the gate he could see personally toppled inwards, squashing a couple of aliens who had been behind it when the attack began. The alien defences had been crippled.

He keyed his radio again. "Mortar teams, go," he ordered. "Fire at will."

The sound of mortars started to echo out over London as the teams opened fire, lobbing shells into the alien base to force the defenders to keep their heads down. Other teams all over London would be assaulting alien patrols, hoping to prevent them from turning and charging to the rescue of their leadership. In the early hours of the invasion, human military and police forces had been badly scattered, their command and control networks broken down and fragmented, leaving them facing their individual nightmares. Now the boot was on the other foot. The aliens were going to have to deal with an unfolding crisis as individuals.

He glanced over at Abdul, who was monitoring the results of the mortar strikes. "Not too bad," he commented. "Shame we couldn't get into the tunnels — we could have popped up right in the midst of them."

Chris shrugged. "Alpha team," he said, picking up his rifle, "go!"

As one, they started to run towards the alien gates, covered by the snipers. Up close, the sound of the mortars was louder. A single shell falling short might take out friendly soldiers, yet there was no time to call off the strikes. No one was entirely sure what the aliens used to build their base, but they did know that it was strong; alien bases across the world had stood off everything from RPGs to guided missiles. They had to keep the aliens pinned up while they deployed into position to assault the base itself.

He smiled as he saw a pair of wounded aliens staggering back inside the base, only to be shot down before they could escape. They took cover behind what remained of the gate and glanced around,

taking out any remaining aliens outside before they advanced into the base proper. Maybe they'd die without ever knowing what had hit them, but the aliens faith in their own invincibility was about to suffer one hell of a knock.

"Go," he ordered.

* * *

Ju'tro Oheghizh had been reading the report from the latest round of interrogations when the attack began. There had been rumours that *something* was being planned, but an attack in the centre of London hadn't been expected. Everyone had known that the aliens and their collaborators controlled the city and attacking their base was merely a way to get encircled, trapped, and then exterminated. But it was clear that the humans hadn't gotten the message. The hooting of the aliens was growing louder, just as the first shells started impacting on the metal shielding.

He lunged towards the command room, expecting to see his officers already reacting to the crisis and summoning assistance from the other garrisons scattered over the city. Instead, the big board had lit up with glowing icons — and then frozen. His officers were trying desperately to reactivate the command network, but it had clearly crashed. Or hacked — the humans were marvels with computer technology. They'd developed entire libraries of tactics for attacking and defending their own computer systems — why wouldn't they be able to come up with something targeted against *his* computer systems?

And if they'd taken down the systems assigned to him, had they taken down everything?

The sound of the human bombardment grew louder. They didn't have a properly-trained computer tech at the base and they couldn't assume that someone who was only familiar with their own systems would be able to fix the damage the humans had inflicted, even if they had had a tech. And that meant that they'd been thrown back on their own resources. The higher commanders had loved the communications systems — it allowed them to supervise operations from on high — but the humans had turned it into a colossal weakness.

"Leave the computers," he ordered. There *were* emergency procedures for computer failure, although he had no idea how many would have the time to implement them if the humans were attacking everywhere. "Get the radios passed out" — unless the humans had managed to set up a jamming system — "and then arm yourselves.

This base is under attack."

He picked up a weapon himself to illustrate the point. The command techs were unused to being in danger — they certainly hadn't been on the first drop into London, or on any of the more dangerous landings after the pre-invasion bombardment — but there was no choice. They'd be able to summon help from the bases surrounding London, if they could hold out long enough for help to arrive.

Another explosion shook the base. The command techs, almost on the verge of panic, cried out in shock. "If they had anything that could break through the shield, they'd have used it by now," Oheghizh snarled at them. A nuclear weapon could have broken through — they hadn't been able to account for some of the human tactical weapons, let alone the devices they'd installed on their missile submarines — but the humans had been oddly reluctant to use nuclear weapons against the invaders. Apart from the Chinese… and China was now a wasteland of competing warlords, trying desperately to survive. "Get out of here and down to the inner defence lines. We don't know how long we have until they start breaking in."

* * *

The first warning of attack had come when the shells started landing inside the base. *U'tra* The'Stig, who had been preparing for the latest sweep against human insurgents, had taken immediate action, ordering the base's own counter-battery weapons to return fire. He didn't realise that the entire command network had been taken down until he'd deployed two Assault Units to sweep the area around the base and capture, kill or drive away the human insurgents. It was only when higher command had failed to take command that he'd discovered the truth.

"Get the radios out," he ordered. He was supposed to direct his units from the mobile command vehicle, but half of its communications functions had been disabled. There was no way of knowing what the humans had done and they didn't have time to try to fix it. The handful of reports they had had before the system failed had warned that the entire network of bases around London had come under attack. "And then prepare for immediate deployment."

For a moment, he found himself lost in indecision. There was clearly a major attack underway, yet he didn't know what was being targeted — which meant he didn't know where he should send his troops. The base itself had only been lightly shelled, but the humans were tricky. It could have been an attempt to force them to stay in the

base, a division… or merely the prelude to a more intensive bombardment. He'd have to keep shifting his troopers out and hope that the humans hadn't anticipated his actions and taken precautions. There were horror stories from many other bases about deploying their forces in pursuit of human raiders, only to walk right into an ambush that bled them heavily before they fell back.

"I managed to get a radio link to the London Base," one of the techs reported. They'd been working on the radios, the only system they could fall back on if the command network had gone down. "They're under heavy attack. The humans are threatening the base itself."

The'Stig cursed. It was bad enough having the humans gloating over how they'd pulled their people — the ones who were due to be executed — out of the detention camp, but if they managed to take out the central base in London it would give them a major propaganda victory. And if they'd learned better than to try to take prisoners, they'd wipe out the administrative staff — human and alien — who were trying to assimilate the humans into the State. The entire program would be set back weeks, if not months.

"I want us moving in five minutes," he ordered, finally. There was no choice — they had to assume that they were the only ones available to relieve the London Base before it fell. The radio operators still hadn't established contact with half of the nearby bases. The'Stig hoped that the bases had merely had problems establishing their own radio links, but he had to assume the worst. The humans might have taken the bases — and the troopers guarding them — out. It was a horrifying thought. "We need to head into London."

There was a pause. "And get the helicopters up too," he added. "We're going to need air cover."

* * *

Chris ran to the next piece of cover, heading towards the main entrance to the alien base. A number of aliens had taken up positions just inside, firing towards the humans as they came closer. Their shooting didn't seem to be particularly accurate, but they were definitely forcing Chris and his men to move carefully. He fired twice and then ducked down as a burst of alien bullets nearly took his head off.

Two men ran closer, holding grenades. They pitched them into the alien building and then ducked for cover themselves as the grenades detonated. A number of aliens were caught and wounded by the blasts, but the others kept firing, determined to keep the humans

from getting inside. Chris waved to the Javelin team as they reached a position where they could fire directly into the doors, ordering them to take their shot. The missile blasted into the base and exploded, smashing through their defences. A handful of grenades polished off the remaining aliens.

"They're trying to snipe from the windows," his radio buzzed. "Our snipers are sniping back."

Chris nodded as he ran forward, into the wreckage of the alien front door. They'd been paranoid enough to set up firing positions inside, but the grenades had wrecked them. A single alien seemed to still be alive, yet he was so badly wounded that there was nothing anyone could do for them. Chris shot him and led the way forward, into the alien base. He'd crawled through Taliban hideouts before, seeing some of the horrors they unleashed upon their own people, but there was something oddly inhuman about the interior of the alien base. He laughed at himself a moment later. Of course there was something inhuman — it had been built by aliens who needed more space than their human counterparts. Their rooms and doors were far larger than anything a human would build.

There had been no way to get an accurate picture of the base's interior layout, but he headed towards the centre on the assumption that the alien command staff would be in the safest place on the base. The aliens seemed to have vanished, leaving the soldiers glancing nervously from side to side, looking for the next threat. It came in a burst of alien gunfire as the Leathernecks sprang an ambush, taking down two soldiers before they were forced to retreat by Chris and his men. Chris unhooked a grenade from his belt, tossed it into the side room, and headed inside as soon as the grenade had exploded. One alien was dead; the other, somehow, was completely unharmed. His shot missed Chris by bare millimetres. Abdul put three bullets into the alien head, shattering his skull.

One by one, the remaining rooms on the lower level were swept. Some of the rooms were completely bare, with nothing to show what the aliens had done in them. Others were packed with alien equipment, sleeping cots and other gear that was vaguely recognisable. A handful of aliens tried to surrender, but there was no time to take prisoners. All they could do was gun them down. Chris knew that it would bother him later, yet there was no time to worry about it now. They had to keep moving.

"I think this is the way up," one of the soldiers called. He'd kicked down a plastic door, revealing what looked like a bumpy ramp leading upwards. Chris had visions of disabled aliens trying to make their way up the stairs in wheelchairs before realising that the aliens probably found human stairs uncomfortable. There had certainly been some

reports of aliens either becoming trapped or simply ignoring the upper floors, although no one had been quite sure why. “There’s a blockage at the far end.”

Chris smiled. It would have been an effective defence against the aliens, but humans were smaller and nimbler. Grenades cleared the way, allowing them to get up to the second floor and start pushing the aliens back. They didn’t seem to be particularly well coordinated, reminding him of the times that headquarters staff had found themselves in contact with the enemy in Afghanistan. They’d found themselves roughly handled by the Taliban. It stood to reason that the aliens had similar people in the rear. He wondered, absently, if they had their own word for REMFs.

He glanced down at his watch as alien bullets snarled overhead. There had been no way to calculate how long it would take before the aliens started sending in reinforcements from the bases outside London. One theory had claimed that the aliens would wait for orders before doing anything — orders which were never going to come. Chris suspected otherwise; some alien commanders were clearly more capable of acting on their own initiative than others. Assuming that they left their base as soon as the attack began… there were too many variables to calculate any likely ETA. They’d just have to assume the worst and push on as fast as they could.

They punched through a plastic wall and came into what looked like a control room, almost comparable to the stations Chris had guarded while on active duty. The aliens fought back savagely, but it was too late. Grenades shattered the room, leaving most of the aliens dead or wounded. The remainder seemed stunned, unable to resist effectively. And one of them was clearly in charge.

* * *

Oheghizh stared at the human, wondering what the humans would do to him. Did they even know his rank? Probably, he told himself. They’d certainly be able to read the gold buttons and know that he was important. But they’d never be permitted to take him prisoner. The Command Triad would simply repeat the threat of bombarding a human city if he wasn’t returned, alive.

Two human soldiers marched him back down the ramp and out towards the open air. There was a brief pause, then one of them produced a black bag and pushed it down over Oheghizh’s head. The command network was down, but the satellites would still be watching… and all they would see, he realised in horror, would be a black mass. They wouldn’t know he was a prisoner…

He wanted to fight, but it was far too late.

Chapter Forty

London
United Kingdom, Day 55

David Lamb watched the alien convoy making its way through London, led by its tanks. They were clearly out for blood, judging by their response to a handful of pot-shots as they'd entered the city. They'd responded with heavy machine gun fire and even HE shells from their armoured vehicles. But there were only a handful of ways to get into London and head to Buckingham Palace, at least if they wanted to get there directly. They pretty much *had* to come this way.

He smiled as he reached for the detonator. The aliens had killed millions of humans, without remorse; they probably didn't know that they'd killed Carol Lamb, wife of David, or their son Thomas. But David knew. He'd been wanting to fight ever since he'd discovered that his family had been caught up in the invasion and cut down in the crossfire. The resistance had trained him and given him a vital role in the counterattack. He had no intention of fucking up and failing to kill as many aliens as he could before they finally killed him. The alien tanks slowed as they spotted the plates they'd left on the road — they looked like mines, if someone was feeling paranoid — and started to move around them. David pushed down on the detonator and braced himself.

The entire world seemed to explode. They'd placed explosive under the road, in two parked cars and in buildings facing the alien position. The blast was terrifyingly loud and the building he was using as a lookout point rocked alarmingly. To the aliens, caught up in the blast, it had to look like a foretaste of the hell awaiting them when they died. He couldn't hear anything through the ringing in his ears as he pulled himself up and staggered towards the fire escape, knowing that the aliens were likely to be ready to murder any human they encountered — assuming that some of the aliens had survived the blast. Someone had definitely survived. He saw a flash of tracer pouring up into the air, but there was no way of telling if humans or aliens had fired the shot.

He saw something moving out of the corner of his eye and turned to see a pair of alien helicopters, moving rapidly towards the billowing cloud of smoke. They were shooting down towards the ground, aiming at resistance fighters — or maybe civilians who had been caught up in the battle. A missile rose up from the ground and slammed into one of the helicopters, sending it spinning over and down into the ground, where it vanished in a colossal explosion. The

second helicopter climbed higher, all the while firing rockets down towards where the missile had come from. David took one final look, knowing that the aliens would never feel safe again in a human city, and then hurried down the stairs to safety. He'd been warned not to linger.

* * *

The shock of the explosion was so powerful that it nearly destroyed the command vehicle, despite the heavy armour that should have protected it from harm. The'Stig cursed as the vehicle spun around on its hover-cushion, almost crashing into one of the other vehicles in the convoy. Judging from what little he'd seen, the blast had almost certainly taken out four tanks, the vehicles he'd placed at the front to deter any humans from ambushing his force. He'd put them out there to be slaughtered.

There was no time to curse his own mistake. The humans were firing down at the convoy from all directions. Bullets were pinging off the command vehicle's armour, while the troopers in the troop transports had to dismount to seek cover before their vehicles were ripped apart by the human assault. Hundreds of mortar shells seemed to be crashing around them, trapping them in a killing zone. The air cover he'd ordered should be able to deal with the mortars, if the humans hadn't brought antiaircraft missiles along to the ambush. They'd probably anticipated that he'd bring his helicopters with him.

"Order the tanks to return fire indiscriminately," he ordered. He'd set out to relieve London Base before it fell, but it looked as if he was going to have to cut his way out of the ambush first. The rear of the convoy was in chaos. One of the tanks had ploughed into a troop transport and ground to a halt. The surviving troopers had managed to dismount and start providing cover for the tanker as he tried to get his vehicle back into operation. "Tell them to clear the streets."

The tanks swung their main guns around and started firing shells into the surrounding buildings. Mighty explosions sent human buildings toppling to the ground, hopefully trapping and killing human ambushers before they could escape. The'Stig had only a moment to register the fact that one of his helicopters had gone down before the second one came under heavy fire from a hidden machine gun and had to break off, trailing smoke as it limped back out of the city. The radio kept buzzing with scraps of isolated chatter, but all his attempts to raise the fighter jet bases outside the city failed. It didn't take much imagination to realise that the humans might have taken out the bases, or at least forced them to keep their jets under cover.

“Start moving back,” he ordered the rear units, as the human fire started to slack off. There was no point in trying to push ahead, even though the hover-cushions could probably allow the tanks to get over the rubble. The humans might have anticipated that and set up a second ambush, firing straight into the tanks vulnerable undersides. “Move the troopers to cover the tanks as they head back.”

He glanced down at the map. Without the command network, it was far harder to coordinate his operations, which gave the humans an advantage. There were other routes to London Base, but if they were also mined… they might walk right into a second trap. The humans had clearly set out to delay them and they’d succeeded admirably.

But if he failed to get to London Base in time, the humans would inflict disastrous damage on the occupation force…

* * *

“Ned, Eccles,” Chris’s radio snapped. “The pig is in the poke.”

Chris nodded. The first alien attempt to relieve their base had been ambushed, but the aliens could presumably shoot their way out of the trap. They had enough firepower to break through, or fall back and try to get to London via a different route.

“Start spraying,” he ordered. There hadn’t really been time to pull any papers or documents out of the command base, but they’d certainly ensure that nothing was left for the aliens to recover. Each of the soldiers carried a flask containing an extremely flammable liquid. Sprayed over the aliens, it would ensure that very little was left — and conceal the fact that the resistance had taken a second high-ranking prisoner. “Everyone else, start falling back to the city.”

He finished emptying his own flask, tossed a detonator into the centre of the alien command room, and then waved for Abdul to precede him back down the alien ramp and into the lower levels. The sound of firing in the distance was growing louder, although there was no sign of any alien aircraft. They’d based antiaircraft teams throughout the city on the assumption that anything flying would be hostile and they’d clearly forced the alien aircraft to keep their distance.

“Not a bad day’s work,” Abdul said, as they made it outside. There were small fires burning throughout the remains of the alien base, with hundreds of dead alien bodies scattered around, waiting for the aliens to recover them. The human bodies had already been dragged away to where they would be buried. There would be time for a proper ceremony later. “I think we taught them a lesson.”

Chris smiled, counting the men out as they left the remains of the alien building. Once everyone was confirmed as having left, he pushed down on the remote control, triggering the detonator he'd left behind in the alien control room. The flames would rapidly destroy the equipment and records as well as most of the DNA traces, making it almost impossible for the aliens to be certain of who'd been in the chamber when the fire started. They'd never know that they'd lost a high-ranking prisoner, not this time. And who knew what he could tell the human race?

The main body of the base would survive — he doubted fire would melt the material they'd used to build it — but it would be a blackened shell. Humans all over the world would take new hope from the story, as they would from all the other stories. The global counteroffensive would have hurt the aliens badly. Maybe, just maybe, they'd hurt the aliens badly enough to convince them to retreat and leave Earth alone.

He keyed his radio one final time, sending the signal to retreat, and then turned it off. It was time to make themselves scarce.

"Impressive," Abdul muttered.

Chris followed his gaze. Great plumes of smoke were rising up over London, revealing where resistance fighters had mounted attacks on the police and the other collaborators, as well as a handful coming from alien bases outside the city. He'd only known snippets of the overall plan, but it was clear that they'd hammered the aliens hard. God alone knew how many Leathernecks had died in the last few hours.

"Yeah," he said. "That's something they can take for granted. Humans don't ever give up."

* * *

Battered bloody, the remains of The'Stig's force finally broke through the human resistance and reached London Base. It was already too late. The base was a broken ruin, flames licking out through portholes that had been intended to allow the defenders to fire out at human opponents. There seemed to be no living thing left alive, not even the small collection of animals some of the command staff had kept as pets, despite edicts against it. Some humans — the Russians, in particular — were very good at using pets and other trained animals to take out tanks and other armoured vehicles.

He dismounted from the command vehicle and stared at the devastation. The entire base would need to be torn down and rebuilt from scratch. He cursed the humans as he realised that they'd wiped

out vast quantities of equipment, all of which would need to be replaced from the homeworld. With all the other demands on the homeworld's resources, it was possible that they'd decide to slow Earth's progress into becoming part of the State. The humans would have a chance to prepare themselves for the next round of fighting, and the next.

The human collaborator government had been totally destroyed. Somehow, the humans had sneaked explosives and insurgents into the building — perhaps through using some collaborators who hadn't really decided to collaborate. They searched the remains of the human building as best as they could, but found that almost all of the senior collaborators were dead. It was clear that they'd been shot down by the insurgents in cold blood. The destruction of most of the records would make it much harder to be sure of who was still alive, or of who could be trusted. Personally, he wouldn't have trusted *any* human. They were a shifty treacherous race. Even their collaborators had been treacherous.

There was no sign of any living human. They'd done the smart thing and made themselves scarce. The'Stig couldn't blame them, not really. His troopers were in a murderous mood, intent on taking it out on the first group of humans that they encountered. Their city almost felt deserted, even though he knew that it was an illusion. The gunfire he could hear in the distance proved that some humans had been left alive.

"I managed to get a link to the Command Triad," his aide called. "The command network has been crippled, but they've managed to clear some functions."

The'Stig nodded and made his slow way back to the command vehicle. The Command Triad would not be pleased. Someone was likely to take the fall for everything that had happened to the Conquest Force. He wondered, mordantly, if they'd try to blame him. It was possible, although almost unthinkable, that he was the senior surviving officer in Britain.

But that couldn't be true, could it?

* * *

"I think they've probably got their network back up now," Abdul said, as they gathered in the estate after the battle. "They've certainly been coordinating the forces they've been moving around the city more effectively."

Chris nodded. The Leathernecks hadn't been shy about re-establishing order, even though their collaborators had been killed or

forced to flee. It would take them weeks to calm London down, weeks before they started rebuilding the collaborator government. Assuming, of course, that they could find anyone willing to become collaborator-in-chief. The last one had been gunned down by a policeman who was supposed to be loyal to the new government.

The reports on the internet kept changing, but it certainly looked as if Operation Hammer had been a success. They'd hit the Leathernecks all over the world, despite problems with international communications; the Leathernecks had to be badly shocked by the experience. The PM and several other world leaders, hiding out, had already uploaded messages of congratulations to the fighting men. Some of the soldiers had been contemptuous of the PM remaining in hiding, but Chris had reminded them that the aliens wanted him dead — or alive, serving as a collaborator. They needed to keep the PM alive and free. Defeating the aliens was all that mattered. The Leathernecks wouldn't give up easily, but they had been hurt. They knew they'd been hit hard…

And if they didn't know that they'd lost a senior officer… Chris smiled at the thought, before realising that getting the prisoner out of London would be difficult. The Leathernecks were searching lorries, they'd never be able to get him down the tunnels… maybe they could float him out on a boat. He had a brief mental vision of a submarine slipping up the Thames before realising that it was absurd. After the Americans had lost a submarine when it came too close to the surface what remained of the Royal Navy wouldn't take the risk. They'd need to find a boat to get the prisoner out.

Standing up, he headed outside and walked down the stairs to the basement. The estate, like many others in East London, had once had a gang in effective control, before the resistance had moved in and taught the gangs what *real* organised violence was all about. Now, it was guarded by soldiers in plain clothes, watching against collaborators and alien spies. They had no hope of stopping the aliens destroying the base if they discovered its existence, but there would be time to destroy the computers and escape.

The alien prisoner was held in the basement, guarded by three soldiers. Like the previous alien prisoner, he had been stripped of everything that might have carried a transponder, but his living quarters weren't so good. They didn't have the equipment to make it as hot or humid as the alien would probably have preferred. Chris looked through the window set into the door and scowled. The alien looked thoroughly miserable. It was dangerous to ascribe human thoughts and feelings to the Leathernecks — they weren't even sure what an alien smile or frown *looked* like — but he was fairly sure of his ground. The alien looked very unhappy.

Chris opened the door and stepped inside. The alien looked up at him, his dark eyes seemingly expressionless. Maybe the alien was hungry. All the experts claimed that the aliens could eat human foods — they wouldn't want Earth if they couldn't — but he hadn't touched the food he'd been given. Perhaps he was trying to starve himself to death.

"You do realise that they will come for me?" The alien said. He had to repeat himself twice before Chris understood. His English, spoken through an inhuman mouth, was mushy. "You won't be allowed to keep me."

"They don't know we have you," Chris said. The aliens had certainly not demanded his return. But then, they'd said almost nothing to humanity since Operation Hammer. "And even if they did, there's one thing about humanity that you folks need to understand."

The alien looked over at the wall. "What?"

"We don't give up," Chris said. "We will keep fighting until we're free."

The alien said nothing.

Chapter Forty-One

Deep Space
Day 70

"Don't try to move," a feminine voice said. "You've had a nasty shock."

Gavin opened his eyes. He saw a young woman, wearing a shapeless tunic, bending over him. It was so unexpected that he was almost convinced that he was in heaven. And then he remembered… the aliens had attacked, they'd run… and something had knocked him over and out. He was a prisoner. There was no other explanation.

"Lie still," the woman said. "It takes a moment for your body to adapt to the change in the environment. You'll be on your feet in no time."

She pushed something to his neck before he could object. He felt a brief stab of pain, almost as if he'd been pricked with a needle, and guessed that he'd been injected with something. A truth drug? Something to make him pliable? If the Leathernecks knew who he was, they'd want to interrogate him — and he knew what they did to make people talk. He just hoped he could hold out long enough for his men to scatter, assuming they knew that he'd been captured. The chaos as they'd retreated from Haddon Hall meant that they might not realise that the aliens had taken him alive. Not even the Leathernecks could get answers out of a dead man.

He tried to sit up, only to feel his head spinning. There was something subtly *wrong* about the environment. The young woman put a hand around his shoulder and helped him to stand upright. He had it a moment later, even though he'd never experienced anything like it in his entire life. The gravity in the compartment was barely two-thirds of Earth's gravity. Some of the scientists had speculated that the Leathernecks came from a world that had a significantly lower gravitational field than Earth, he recalled, but he had dismissed it at the time. The Leathernecks were so much stronger than the average human that he suspected it was the other way around.

"Who…" His throat hurt. He had to swallow hard before he could finish the sentence. "Who are you?"

"Sharon Cordova, United States Marine Corps," she said, briskly. "I was a medic before the invasion, which is why they put me in here." She shrugged. "You seem to have come through the suspension process unharmed. Some guys swear blind that they remained aware even though they were floating in a stasis field."

Gavin stared at her, confused. She smiled at him. "If you're

feeling better, I have someone you need to meet."

"One moment," Gavin said. The gravity wasn't the only odd thing about their environment. He could feel a faint queasiness in the back of his mind, hear a constant thrumming just loud enough to be on the edge of perception. "Are we prisoners?"

Sharon grinned. "Not exactly," she said, as she helped him towards the door. It opened as they approached, revealing a compartment large enough for a small party of Leathernecks. "Like I said, I have someone you need to meet."

Gavin walked through the door and stopped dead, unable to believe his eyes. The Leathernecks were humanoid, if not human. Some of the scientists had speculated that humanoid was evolution's default form, suggesting that all the old TV shows with humanoid aliens might have had a point after all. But… the alien in front of him was anything, but humanoid. A great mass of orange-gold tentacles, constantly spinning around the central egg-shaped mass… his mind almost refused to grasp its existence. The body — he assumed it was the alien's body — seemed featureless. There were no eyes, no mouth… no way of deducing how the alien collected data about its environment. Merely looking at it made him dizzy. It seemed to be incapable of remaining motionless.

"This is Protector Hank," Sharon said. She had the grace to look embarrassed. "They don't have names, not like us — we had to call him something."

"I am very pleased to meet you," Hank said. It's voice seemed to come from a small device hanging below the central body. The alien certainly sounded a great deal more natural than anything the Leathernecks had ever produced. "We have a great deal to talk about."

"I think I need to sit down," Gavin said. "And perhaps something to eat."

"Certainly," Hank said. The alien didn't need to turn; it just started wobbling its way down the corridor. Gavin wondered if the alien had had its back to him, before realising that 'front' and 'back' probably meant little to the aliens. They could head in any direction they liked without turning, leaving him wondering how they saw. Some form of mental vision? A sense of perception? Or maybe they saw through their tentacles. "We have become accustomed to feeding humans over the last few weeks."

* * *

"They captured me in Missouri," Sharon explained, twenty minutes later. They were seated around a table that had clearly been

designed for humans, rather than Leathernecks… or Hank's race. "We had a base camp for wounded there — somehow, they discovered our location and raided us, rather than dropping a hammer on our heads. They took us off-world, loaded us into suspension pods… and the next thing we knew, the Leatherneck ship had been captured by our new friends. I think they'd been lurking around Earth for the past few months, waiting for a chance to stick a spanner in the works."

"That is correct," Hank said. "We took advantage of the remoteness of your planet to cause one of their ships to go missing. They will not understand what has happened until it is far too late."

Gavin stared at the alien. "You mean to say you did nothing while they invaded our world?"

"You misunderstand the nature of interstellar travel and communications," Hank informed him. "It can take months to travel between stars. By the time we discovered that the Leathernecks had found you, it was already too late to intervene — they had already dispatched the Conquest Force. There was nothing we could do, but watch and wait for an opportunity to act."

There was a long pause. "We first encountered them roughly two hundred of your years ago," Hank added. "It was hate at first sight. We spent fifty years fighting them before coming to a reluctant agreement that neither of us were likely to win outright. The victor in the conflict would be badly weakened, while the loser would be pushed to the brink of extermination. And that would have… consequences. We made a truce with them. Since then, both of us have been pushing out as far as we can, attempting to gain a decisive advantage before the war resumes. Your world was invaded and occupied as part of that process."

"They want to add our technology to their own," Gavin said, softly. "And start using us as expendable fighters too…"

"They tend to think in terms of brute force," Hank observed. "Their socio-political development led not to the victory of capitalism, as on your world, but a fascist state that managed to overcome many of the flaws that threatened to bring it crashing down. They were quite successful at absorbing the rebels, the thinkers, into their system. Those who might point out that the Emperor has no clothes, to use one of your world's sayings, end up supporting the State."

"You seem to know us very well," Gavin observed.

"We have… sources within the Leatherneck State," Hank said. "They collected a great mass of data on your world's society, even if much of it made little sense to their researchers."

Gavin smiled. "People who realise that the Emperor has no clothes?"

The alien didn't bother to deny it. "Unfortunately, their

traditional way of coping with the universe — brute force — has given them an advantage over you," it said. "You barely started to exploit space — they had massive space stations in orbit within twenty years of developing rocket technology. From there, they eventually cracked the secrets behind warp drive — and they did it with computers inferior to yours.

"There is some speculation that someone else gave them a hand," Hank added, "but there has never been any proof of outside interference. Your world's history should inform you that predicting technological development is a difficult task. The Leathernecks approach problems from a different angle to your own race, but that doesn't make them stupid. They have already crushed your world."

"Yes," Gavin said, flatly. "Are you going to destroy their ships in orbit?"

"An open act of war would restart the conflict," Hank said. "We would prefer to avoid outright conflict before we were ready to win."

"You captured one of their ships," Gavin pointed out. "Isn't that an act of war?"

A human would have smirked. "Not if the Leathernecks never find out what happened to their ship," Hank countered. "And they won't. Ships go missing all the time."

"Maybe the Leathernecks are capturing your ships," Gavin said, dryly.

"It's possible," Hank agreed. He didn't sound particularly concerned. "Both sides have been pushing the truce to the limits."

"Right," Gavin said. "So… what are you going to do to help?"

"Provide you with support," Hank said. "Provide you with weapons. Provide you with tools you can use against your alien overlords. Help you to recover your world."

"And you'd get an ally for the coming war," Gavin said. He couldn't say no. Whatever had happened back on Earth, they needed help if they were to kick the Leathernecks off the planet. "When do we start?"

Hank's tentacles seemed to slow, just for a second. "How about now?"

End of Part One

The Story Will Continue In:

The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

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